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45 HOT Reviews:

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SOUND CARD AND 56K MODEM ROUNDUPS

An IDG Communications Publication

September 1998
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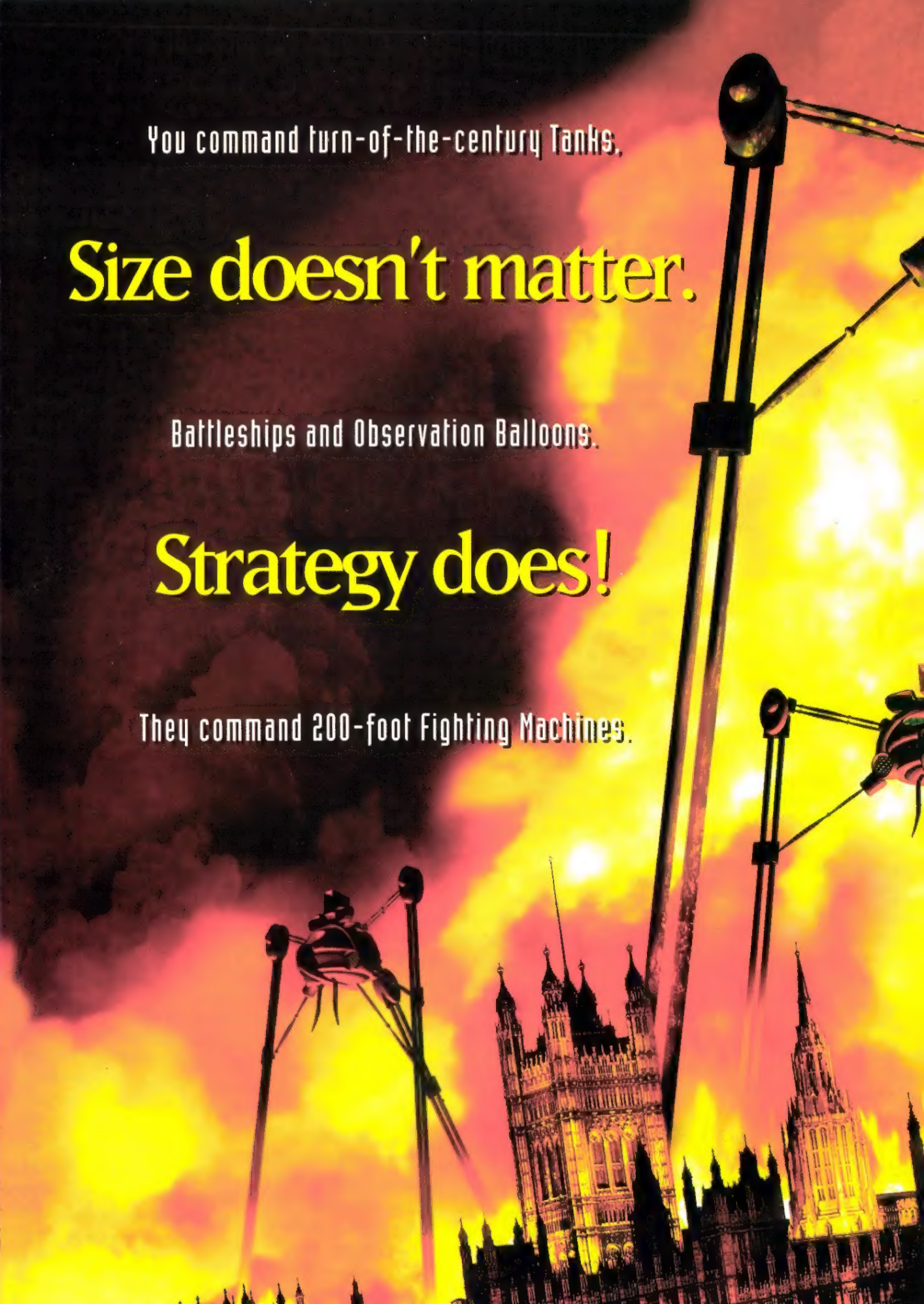
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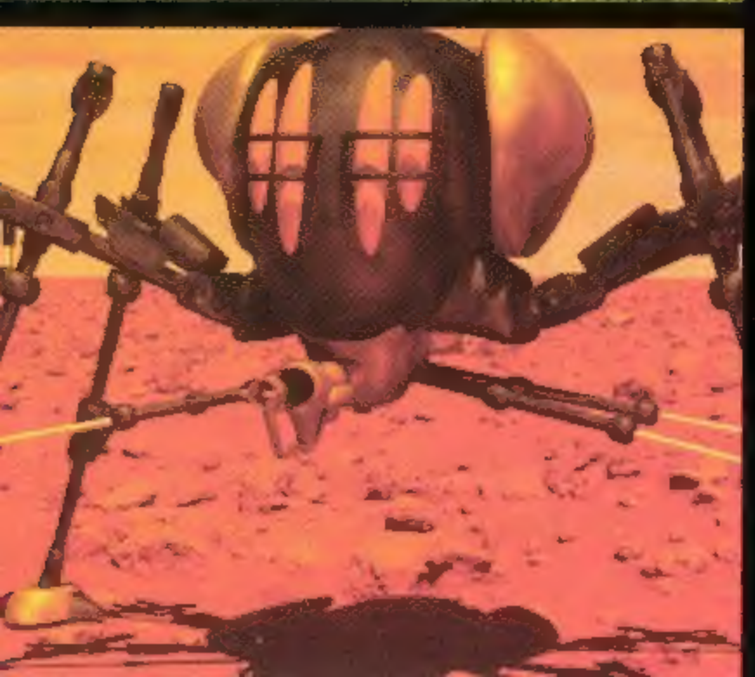

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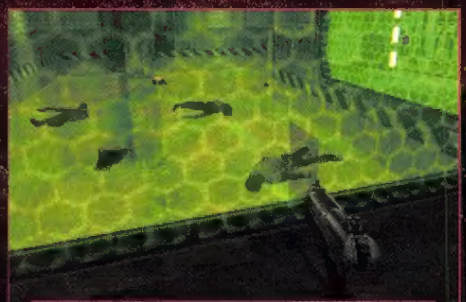

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Four customizable, playable characters: Caleb, Ophelia, Gabriella and Ishmael.
Flame Throwers, Tesla Cannons, Voodoo Dolls and Humiliation Animations.

PC GAMES

CONTENTS

FEATURES

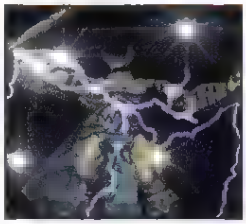
50 EverQuest
By Daniel Morris

Persistent, massively multiplayer online worlds have been RPG developers' Holy Grail since we all wiped off the MUD and began graphically dungeon delving. Now 989 Studios thinks EverQuest's stellar graphics, expansive world, and state-of-the-art technology will make it the persistent-world promised land.

58 The Role-playing Renaissance
By Daniel Morris

Get ready to swing your swords and cast your spells: the RPG genre appears to be finally awakening from its slumber as several top-notch titles approach release. We give you the vitals on Asheron's Call, Baldur's Gate, Diablo II, Fallout 2, Lands of Lore III, Return to Krondor, and Ultima: Ascension.

62 State of the Game
By *PC Games* Staff



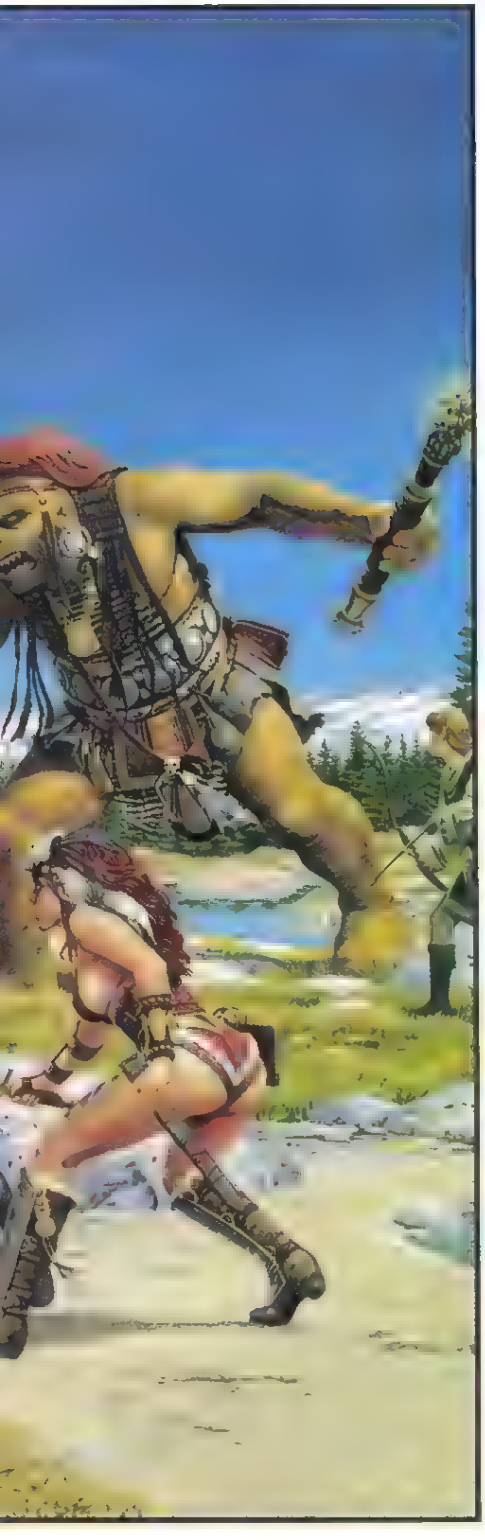
The *PC Games* crew descended on this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo to rip the lids off next year's most innovative games. We break it down for you genre by genre so you'll know now what's going to be shaping gaming tomorrow. We also take shots at and give props to the games, hardware, and trends that stunned us or bummed us out.

NEWS

29 Game Wire
By George Chronis

The brand-new engines powering Prax War, Prey, and Nocturne are revving up to give the Quake II and Unreal engines a run for their money. Plus: A gamer's look at Win 98, Duke gets Unreal, and newsflashes on DKII, Anachronox, and Team Fortress 2.

SEPTEMBER 1998
VOLUME 5, NUMBER 7



SNEAK PEEKS

Jagged Alliance 2 81
The Lionhead Diaries 82
Black & White 83

REVIEWS

The A-List 78
Unreal 84
Forsaken 86
Spec Ops 87
Chekov's Lost Missions 88
Flesh Feast 88
Redneck Rampage Rides Again 88
Shadow Master 89
Black Dahlia 90
Starship Titanic 91
The X-Files Game 93
Descent: Freespace 94
X-COM: Interceptor 95
F1 Racing Sim 96
Motorhead 96
iF-22 v. 5.0 97
Monster Truck Madness 2 98
Final Fantasy VII 99
Industry Giant 100
Panzer Commander 101
iPanzer '44 102
Independence War 103
HardBall 6 104
Baseball 3D 105
High Heat Baseball 105
Cyberstorm 2 106
MechCommander 107
Army Men 108
Dominion 109
World Cup 98 110
Dark Omen 110
Addiction Pinball 111
Burnout 111
Liberation Day 111
Warbreeds 111
Strat-O-Matic 3.0 112
Baseball Mogul 99 112
Microsoft Golf '98 112
END GAME 113
Quake II/Hexen II add-ons, Comanche Gold

DEPARTMENTS

EDITORS' NOTE 12
It's top of the summer for gaming. Think hot.
PC GAMES.EXE 16
PC GAMES.COM 20
INCOMING! 27
BOOKMARK THIS 42
WEASEL'S WATCH 46
Babylon 5, South Park, *and other cool missions for Descent: Freespace.*
THE PLAYER 48
Please don't KISS me.
FACE-OFF 126
Are RTS games all played out?

STRATEGY & TACTICS

CHEATS 114
Waste-'em, paste-'em codes for Unreal, Forsaken, Dark Omen, Cyberstorm 2, and plenty others.

TECHNOBABBLE

SOUND-CARD ROUNDUP 116
The latest and greatest, including Predator 3D, Monster Sound M80, and A3DXstream.
HARDWARE SPOTLIGHT 120
56K modem roundup, SFX Plus, and more.
DIRECTX 6.0 123
Our rundown of its features.
S.O.S. 124

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PC GAMES A-List

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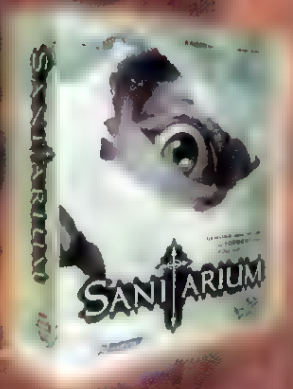


EDITORS' NOTE

G.CHRONIS W.KNIBBE

Blitzkrieg!

Stand clear, hold on, look out. Grab your mouse, keyboard, and joystick and get ready to rock, because the games industry is hitting its fever pitch right now. The direct bombardment began at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo, where developers try to convince the industry that they have the hottest thing going since Pong.

The salvos continue through December as the industry cranks it up another notch in an effort to meet the biggest deadline of the year: Christmas. Right now at a developer near you, it's crunch time. We're talking 20-hour coding sessions, ripping out features, putting in others, squashing bugs, redoing art, sleeping at the office—ignoring everything in life but The Game.

It's a boon for you and us because this crunch time produces an explosion of new games—and you're going to find a lot to like in the coming onslaught. We went to E^3 and scoped out the best games genre by genre (see "State of the Game," page 62) to bring you the lowdown on those that offer something new to their genre or caught our attention because they'll do their genre proud.

Deserving some special attention right now is that old standby, the role-playing game. After what we'll politely call a lull, there's a new crop of heavy-hitting RPGs on the horizon to keep you warriors, rogues, and bards happy.

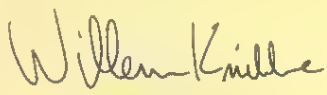
Despite their high-risk, high-cost nature, getting the massively multiplayer online RPG right remains a persistent goal among developers. 989 Studios thinks it has all the elements in place with EverQuest, so we sent Daniel Morris on a quest to find its secrets as well as to report on the other top-notch dungeon-delvers. His cover story is on page 50.

And for you techheads who actually give a Vore about first-person game engines, we took a closer look at three of the sexier chassis set to power the likes of Prey, Prax War, and Nocturne in 1999. That's great news if the thought of endless Quake II and Unreal clones vexes your sensibilities as much as it does ours.

We also have the sad duty of informing you that Steve Klett was ambushed by a squad of campers outside our new offices and... Oh, okay, not really. The Player decided he was ready for a change of pace and has taken a time-out from full-time games journalism. We wish him well and are happy to say he'll still be contributing to *PC Games*, both with his ongoing column and stories like this month's Unreal review.

So, strap yourself in and turn the page to see what you'll be playing this fall.

George T. Chronis



Willem Knibbe

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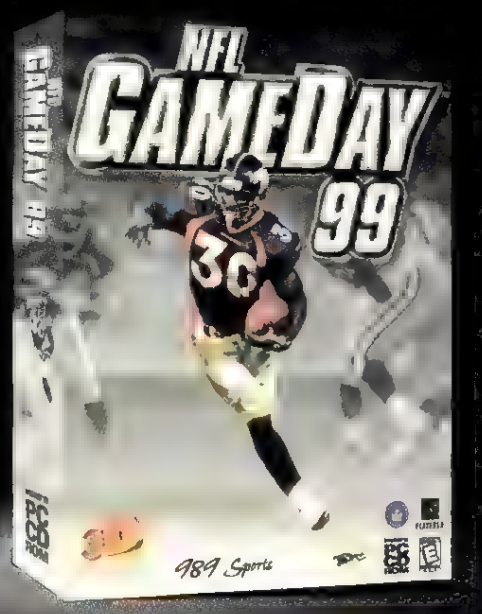

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I'VE DESTROYED BUILDINGS IN MY WAY.
SO WHY
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I AM A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH.

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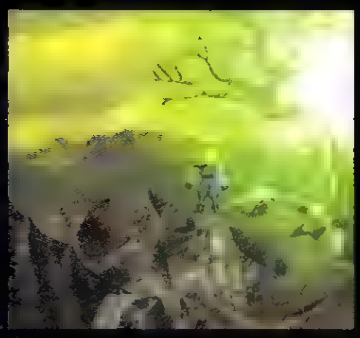
URBAN ASSAULT

PC GAMES.EXE

10 GREAT DEMOS

Welcome to the all-new PC Games CD-ROM. We've put together the most user-friendly, simian-free, game-packed CD ever. Below are the instructions—but we figure you'll find your way around soon enough.



Demo of the Month:
Final Fantasy VII
(Eidos Interactive)

Plus Demos for:
Commandos
(Eidos Interactive)
Dominion
(Ion Storm)
F-15
(Jane's Combat Simulations)
HardBall 6
(Accolade)
Independence War
(Infogrames)
MechCommander
(MicroProse)
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(Electronic Arts)
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(Activision)

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(GT Interactive)

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Win 95: Place the CD-ROM in the drive. Click on the Start button and select Run. Type x:\pcgames.exe (where "x" is the letter of your CD ROM drive) and hit Enter. The interface will recognize your operating system and run the enhanced 32-bit version.

Windows 3.x: In Program Manager, select "File" and "Run". Type x:\pcgames.exe (where "x" is the letter of your CD-ROM drive) and hit Enter. The interface will recognize your OS and run the 16-bit version.

Recommendation: For best results, run the interface in 16-bit high color.

Tech help on running the demos is the responsibility of their respective publishers. Tech-help phone numbers have been provided in the demo descriptions. For support on running the CD interface, direct queries to *tom@pcgames.com*.

Using the Web Link

We've supplied a quick-hit Web link for more information. Whenever you see the Web link, click to jump straight to that site. The first time you run this function, you'll be prompted to locate your Web executable file. Default directories for these files are:

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C:\Program\Files\Netscape\Communicator\Program\netscape.exe

Double click on the iexplore or netscape.exe to run the browser. This information is then stored in the *PC Games* directory on your C: drive.

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I TOLD MY GUYS TO ATTACK FROM BOTH FLANKS.

I KNOW WHERE THE TECH UPGRADE SECTOR IS.

I KNOW WHERE TO PLACE MY HOST STATION.

I KNOW WHERE THE POWER STATIONS ARE.

SO WHY AM I STILL DEAD?

I SAW A MYKONIAN CUBOID FORMATION.

I'M BEING SMART ABOUT MY MOVES.

I KNOW WHICH SECTORS ARE SECURE.

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ZONE

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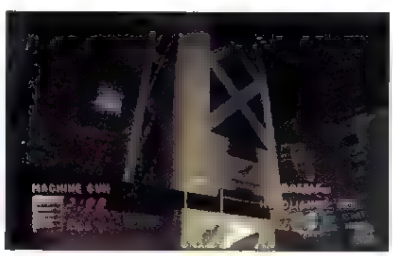
Have You Driven An Urban Assault Vehicle Lately?



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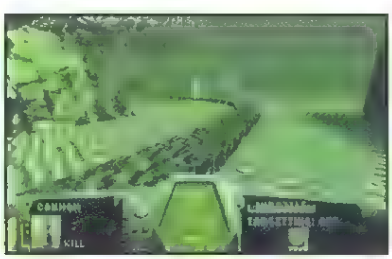

All Nataka Remotely Piloted Vehicles ship with version 56 9 of BattleHelper, Nataka's award-winn ng operating system Some vehicles not exactly as shown All performance specifications given for unencumbered vehicles in 1 G of gravitational force and 101 9 kPa of barometric pressure unless otherwise ind cated BattleHelper is a registered product of the Nataka Corporate Empire Unauthorized use of the BattleHelper name is a violation of applicable treaties and will be met with military force Gunmetal™ and Mad Genius Software™ are registered trademarks of Mad Genius Software Ltd

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ALL-OUT ASSAULT

We recognize a good game when we see one, which is why we began the Files series months ago with The SiN Files, devoted to Activision's upcoming game. Now that SiN is nearing release, we've latched onto another title we feel is extraordinary—Microsoft's Urban Assault. Read the Urban Assault Files for the full scoop on this crazy real-time action/strategy hybrid.

INSIDER INTERVIEWS

Recent posts include a conversation with the producer of Activision's upcoming Beneath, plus an interview with *The X-Files*' Gillian Anderson about the new X-Files Game.

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HELLO, GAMEPRO

If you've ever wished Games.net offered more in-depth console coverage, take heart. Fellow IDG pub *GamePro* will soon be climbing aboard to regale us with plenty of news, previews, reviews, and more on games made for the Nintendo 64, PlayStation, Saturn, and arcades. Watch for them.

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- Spec Ops v. 1.3
- Spec Ops (Voodoo II–only textures)

PREVIEWS

- Dark Side of the Moon
- Drakan
- Fighter Legends
- Game, Net & Match
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Plus: extended versions of this month's Addiction Pinball and Warbreeds reviews

PHILIPS

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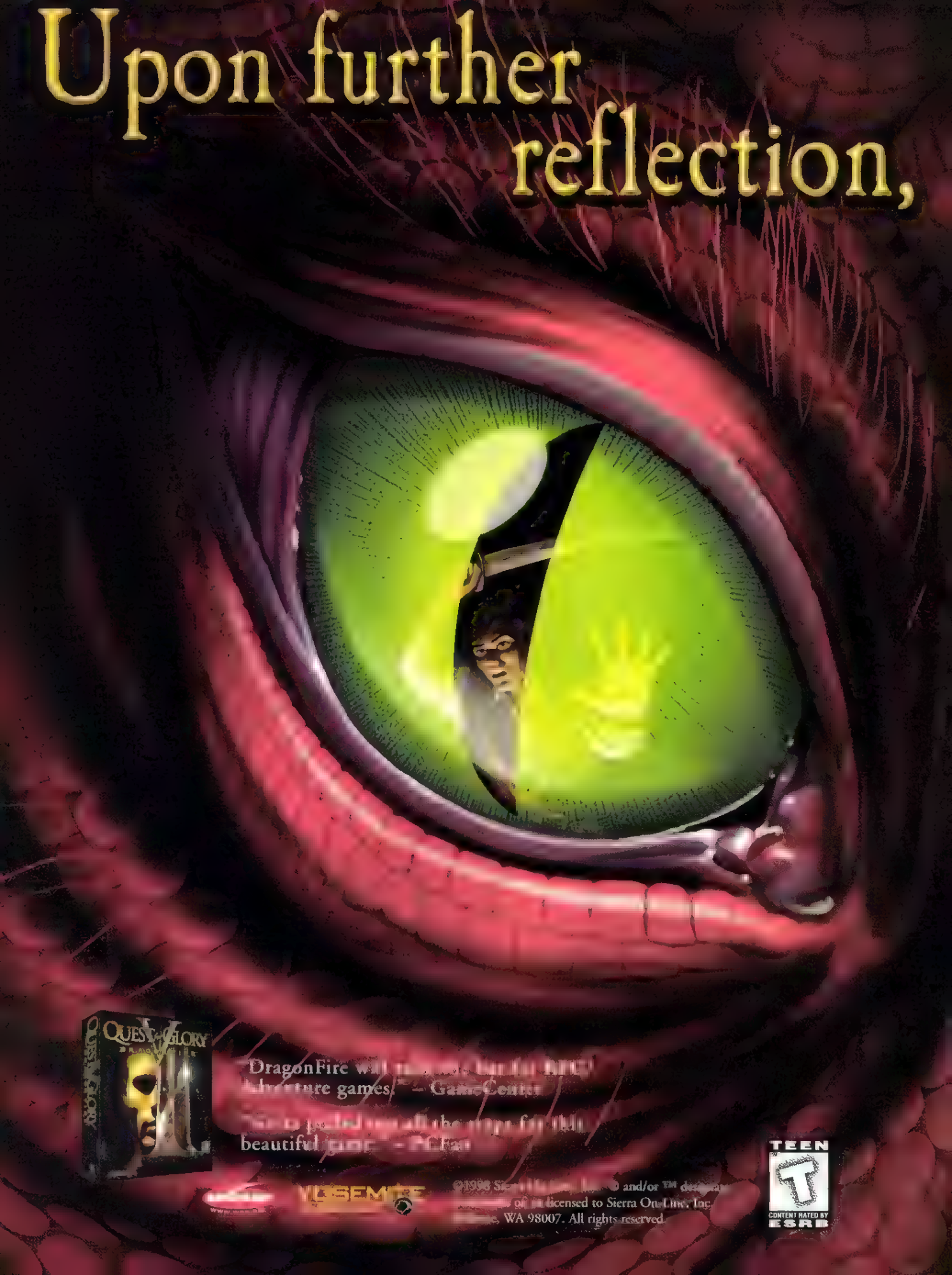

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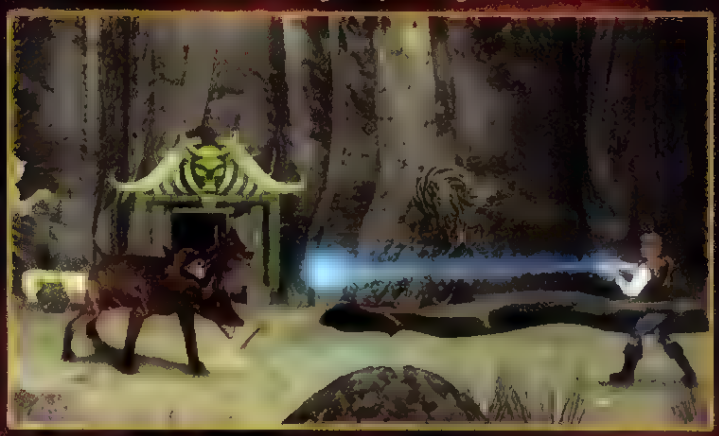

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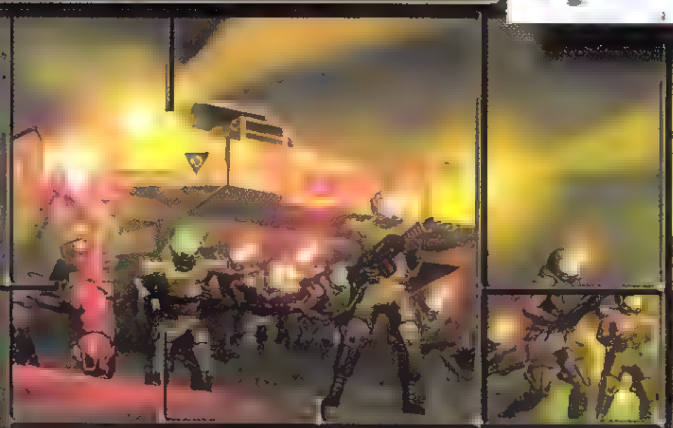

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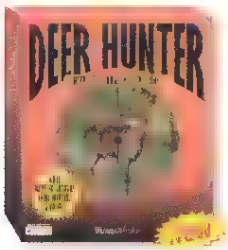

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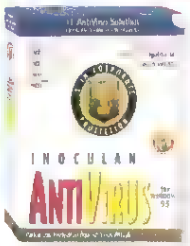

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INCOMING!

Question of the Month: Shifting Shooters?

The first-person shooter genre is clearly changing. There's more emphasis on story and character development, with new engines and technologies coming that will further alter the shooter landscape. Do you like the direction the genre's headed? Is story being emphasized too much? Is multiplay more important than single play? Which games are you anticipating most (Half-Life, SiN, Requiem, Daikatana...)? Send your thoughts to *pcgamesletters@pcgames.com*, or write to PC Games, 501 2nd St., Suite 500, San Francisco, CA 94107. One randomly chosen letter-writer wins a free game and a *PC Games* T-shirt.

[Editor's note: May/June's Question of the Month (Too Much Hype?) seems to have hit home. Many of you fired off passionate flames decrying publishers' big-bucks game promotion; a lesser, but no less vocal, segment praised it. This month, we devote the page to your responses on this heated issue.]

Put Up or Shut Up

Hype's about the only thing I can't stand about gaming today. All you see are publishers cutting each other down and running bloody ads explaining how their game will be the greatest ever. Then, when games come out, they suck. Can't companies see that creating hype and not living up to it just digs them an early grave?

Here are my suggestions for game companies: Don't hype your product, just tell us what's unique about it. Gamers like surprises: give us some. Stay on schedule—talk to your programmers and set a realistic release date. If you can't, don't bother giving one. And above all, don't make false promises. All you'll do is discredit your own company, like Origin did with Ultima Online.

Troy Bowman, via email

Sure, pre-production hype's too much. But what we really need are developers with the courage to not ship a game until it's truly finished. You don't see cars with gas tanks that explode after 50 miles of driving, do you?

Cole Akeson, via email

Hype Helps

Too much hype? You've gotta be kidding. The industry makes loads of money off people who buy games early, and it gets free beta-testers. Game publications seem to be doing well, too. I know I benefit from the status quo, since I usually buy my games a couple of months after release. By then the bugs have been (mostly) worked out, and retail cost has dropped significantly. About the only people who don't benefit—those in line the morning a game's released—well, you know what P.T. Barnum said is born once a minute.

Jim Fardette, via email

I don't believe there's too much hype on "dream" games. It's good to read about the possibilities of what might be in them. It shows me that game creators are listening to and trying to incorporate gamers' demands. I don't condemn developers for their efforts—I'm too amazed with their accomplishments.

Timothy H. Burgess, via email

Ads, Sure; Lies, No

I believe that hype's an integral part of any game's production, and that early hype does far more good than harm. Advertising lets the public know what you're working on, when (approximately) it'll come out, and what the basis of the game will be.

The problems start when we take hype too seriously. It happened to me around August 1997. Remember the Starcraft hoopla? I was hooked. Then I watched with dismay as Blizzard missed all the deadlines, and finally I grew blasé about the whole thing. In fact, I'd pretty much forgotten about Starcraft when it came out. When it did, though, I was one of the first with a copy, and you know what? All the hype came crashing back down on me. Did it reduce the gaming experience? No. Did I see features that were promised but not included? No. Starcraft's an excellent game, living up, at least satisfactorily, to its advertising. Hype's an excellent source of information for the gamer, integral to letting us know what's coming—as long as we remember that the game will likely miss its release date.

Still, it's our incontestable right to know what we're buying before we buy it, and if a game doesn't deliver, well, I'm sure we could've used the heat if we burned the money. More and more developers have been doing this (as you noted about Quake II in May/June's Editor's Note)—stripping beta-testing and features to get games out the door. This is the worst kind of false advertisement, and I think the perpetrators should be put out of business.

Remi Broemeling, via email

Greatest Corrections of All Time

If you failed the Trivia Challenge in our "Greatest Games of All Time" feature (July/August), it could well be our fault. D'oh! First, we got our X-COMs confused: Gauss is the first researchable technology in X-COM: Terror from the Deep (the sequel); laser is the first in X COM: UFO Defense. We said Wing Commander took place in 2699; shoulda been 2669. We also said Myth was the numero uno seller of all time. Well, at least we made the folks at Bungie happy. The best seller is, of course, Myst. Much discussion transpired over our claim that Doom appears on more platforms than any other game. Josh Larios pointed out that you can play Infocom's games on everything from Unix to PalmPilots, and Josh Martin astounded us with a huge list of Lemmings platforms. And finally, Mike Wilson wasn't id's president, he was its marketing and distribution guy. We apologize for the goofs.

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The Engines of '99

By George T. Chronis and Willem Knibbe

Worried that every new action game or RPG for the foreseeable future will look like Quake II or Unreal? That proposition has crossed our minds here at *PC Games*. Despite the fact that id and Epic have crafted fantastic engines that have made major strides for 3D gaming, no gamer wants to see each new shooter looking like another mod of those games.

Promisingly, 1999 will see three new 3D engines revving up from the mechanics at Rebel Boat Rocker, 3D Realms, and Terminal Reality. Powering such heady-looking games as Prax Wars, Prey, and Nocturne, these engines will likely broaden gameplay dynamics while they provide healthy competition for the Quake II and Unreal clones.

Prax War

Shooter fans already know that a bunch of guys from the original Duke Nukem 3D team signed up with Ritual to do SiN, but less well known is that another cadre went on to form Rebel Boat Rocker (RBR). Prax War is RBR's first child, and this first-person, 3D-only shooter has possibly the most radical new engine we've seen. With the exception of renderings, which are written in the C programming language, the Prax War engine is written entirely in Sun's Java.

RBR chief architect Randy Pitchford says coding in Java provides a lot more flexibility than the more traditional Quake or Unreal engines. Examples of this flexibility include scaling polygons: As players pull back from an adversary, the polygon count will go from a high of 1,000 up close to 150 at a distance. This will allow RBR to "bring back the mow-down," according to Pitchford, where you'll face a platoon of up to 50 soldiers at a time.

Single-player missions will be fought with the assistance of four AI comrades.

RBR is boosting Prax War's polygon counts to create more lifelike models.

Players will also be able to interact more fully with a majority of models in the game. See an AI-driven mech that would make your mission easier to accomplish? Just kill the driver and jump in. One thing Pitchford says he's always wanted to do is set up a game server that can simultaneously handle CTF- and Rocket Arena–style mods. Prax War will be able to do this.

Gameplay puts players in charge of a strike team of five commandos assigned to take out a terrorist menace. In multiplayer matches, players will be able to choose from any character model encountered in the game. Expect Prax War between next spring and next summer. Because we're talking Java, there could potentially be Mac and Linux versions as well, but the jury's still out on platform support.

Prey

Despite using the Unreal engine for Duke Nukem Forever (see below), 3D Realms has different plans for Prey, the story of a 27-year-old Apache who's abducted to a massive alien mothership and must fight his way home. The Portal Engine is 3D Realms' bet on the future (excepting Duke Forever, it'll encompass the next four games beyond Prey) and is scalable to take advantage of the next two upgrades in CPUs from Intel: Katmai and IA-64.

continued on page 41

Duke Nukem Forever Gets Engine Change

Hmmmm, that's gotta hurt. Take note, action fans: 3D Realms has pulled the plug on using the Quake II engine for Duke Nukem Forever. In a major surprise announcement, 3D Realms president George Broussard has confirmed that a deal has been struck with Epic MegaGames to substitute the Unreal engine.

"We got our hands on Unreal right before E^3 and were impressed," Broussard says. "We asked ourselves, 'Why not make a switch?'"

Broussard says that upon reviewing its contract with id, 3D Realms found nothing preventing it from making the change to the Unreal engine. The decision was made to start negotiations with Epic.

"We've known the guys at Epic for quite a while and everything went very smoothly. It only took four days to put the deal together," Broussard says.

3D Realms has ditched the Quake II engine in favor of the Unreal engine for Duke Nukem Forever.

At worst, the switch will cost the design team a couple of months, he says. He's positive that work completed so far can be easily ported to Unreal's engine. Broussard discounts questions about possible difficulties in translating Duke Nukem code tweaks to an entirely different engine.

continued on page 41

GAME WIRE

Covert Ops

Dungeon Makeover

Bullfrog is working up a total revamp of one of last year's most novel strategy games. Despite the joys of smacking imps around, the original game's graphics engine was already showing its age, especially in first-person view. Not so in Dungeon Keeper II. In a very early build shown to *PC Games*, DKII sported an all-3D look and zooming point-of-view that should enhance imp-slapping significantly. Bullfrog is adding much more detail (200 polygons each) to character animations, enough to make the facial expressions of your cowering minions visible. All told, there will be around 30 characters, 11 of whom are holdovers from the original DK. Bullfrog is also implementing colored lights and dynamic-lighting effects in the dungeons. Players will be able to zoom from an RTS-style above-the-action view down to a floor-level real-time perspective. In addition to the 22 campaigns and five bonus levels, DKII will also have beefed-up multiplay that supports everything from Internet to LAN play. Also featured will be special multiplayer maps and player variations such as keeper vs. hero and keeper vs. keeper.

Horny returns in DKII.

Indestructibles Ascendant

Speaking of Bullfrog, remember all those PC superhero games that died in development the last couple of years (Eidos' Incredible Hulk, GTE's Siege, EA's Gen13)? One of them, The Indestructibles, seems to be back on track. This comic-hero strategy game—similar to MicroProse's recently canceled Agents of Justice—was originally supposed to be out by now but was put on hold. Rumors at the time intimated everything from the lead designer going on a one-year cruise to having to pull Indestructibles staff into other, more important projects. It seems Bullfrog parent EA always liked the game, and sure enough, it's been resurrected—but don't expect it to look anything like the early screens released a while ago. All previous work was mostly a concept demo based on a very early version of the Dungeon Keeper engine. This time, Bullfrog is starting from the ground up. As in Agents of Justice, the heroes are being developed specifically for the game, but Bullfrog is keeping mum about the gameplay.

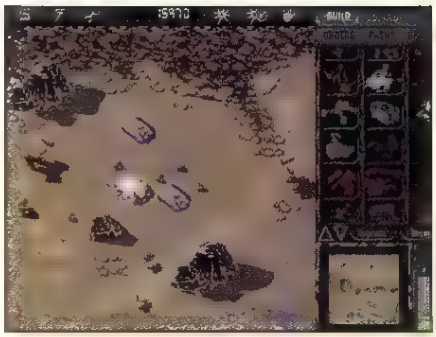
Ion's Ode to RPGs

Although it would be easy to think of John Romero's 54th-story penthouse office suite as a shrine to first-person shooters, Ion Storm designer Tom Hall is using the Quake II engine to craft a *Blade Runner*–esque RPG called Anachronox.

With more than 440 NPCs and 150 enemies, this third-person game will likely come on two CDs. Anachronox's designers are shooting for a very cinematic moving-camera perspective as players maneuver the main character through a colony built on the ruins of a long-dead alien city. And instead of canned cinematics, the Quake II engine is being tweaked to build cut-scenes that use actual gameplay graphics. Anachronox is slated to feature depth-creating lighting and particle effects using 24-bit and 32-bit color. The expansive map levels, 60 percent of which are already complete, share a modern gothic look on a grand scale. As for gameplay, if you've ever read Frederick Pohl's *Gateway* novels, then you'll be right at home in Anachronox. To non–Pohl fans, that means players can use hyperspace portals to visit far-off exotic worlds.

Dark Reign Goes Retro

While Age of Empires II adds to an already proven gameplay formula and it may be years before we see what Cavedog has in mind for Total Annihilation 2, Activision definitely has solid plans in place for Dark Reign II. In a complete departure from the C&C style interface, DRII will be a fully 3D game that lets players zoom as far into the trenches as they wish and rotate, too, as you can in Myth. And "trenches" is the operative word, because



Dark Reign will never look like this again.

DRII is an infantry-based prequel to the original. How far back in the Imperium timeline is being kept under wraps, but the extremely early proof-of-technology build shown to *PC Games* features decidedly 21st-century gameplay. The resource model will be different from the water-based model used in the first game; all Activision's saying now is that it will be more "intuitive." The company is shooting for a release sometime during the first half of 1999.

Valve Grabs Team Fortress

In a major coup for the creators of Half-Life, Valve went out and bought TF Software, the creator of the Team Fortress mod. TF is an extremely popular Quake mod that introduced new strategic teamplay options to the game, including new unit classes such as scouts, snipers, medics, a heavy-weapons specialist, and a demolition expert. Eschewing Quake II entirely, Team Fortress 2 will be a Half-Life exclusive—and will be released approximately six weeks after the game as an expansion pack. Exactly when is still up in the air, especially since the release schedule for Half-Life itself is still a closely guarded secret.

Team Fortress just became Half-Life's expansion pack.

Win 98 Has the Gamer's Edge

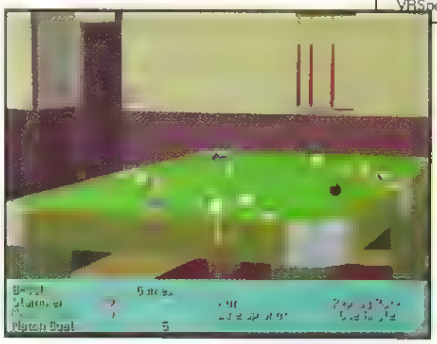
By Bob Lindstrom

In June, escorted by the US Department of Justice, Windows 98 finally made its retail debut—and none too soon. The aging Windows 95—Frankensteined together with multiple DirectX fix-ups, USB add-ons, and TCP/IP patches—was feeling like a smorgasbord at a flea market. PC gamers have deserved a more consistent operating system for a long time. Now they've got it.

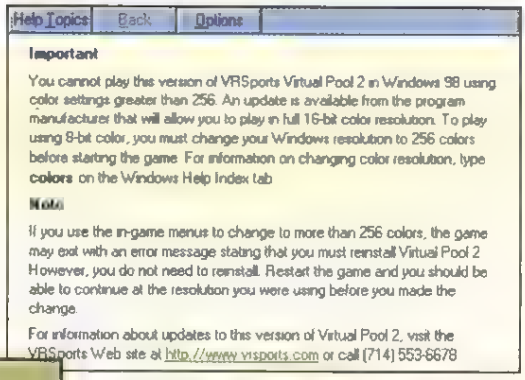
After spending some time with a late RC (release candidate) version of Win 98 sent to computer makers, it's clear to me that Microsoft's latest OS breadwinner is a lot more than a shotgun marriage between Internet Explorer and your Windows desktop. (Take that, Janet Reno.) Improved performance; a more robust, less crash-prone multitasking environment (which includes enhanced options for running DOS-based games); a highly customizable interface; and superior peripheral support will be of special interest to tweak-happy players who want to wring that last drop of performance and convenience out of their PC-gaming setups.

Compatibility with DOS legacy games is variable but consistently better than Win 95. Carmageddon, a game that's notoriously difficult to install and run, launches effortlessly within Win 98 whether in low res, hi-res, or 3D-accelerated mode. Origin System's Crusader: No Remorse, another Win-buster, can install and run only in a DOS-mode window; yet it still requires less tuning than in Win 95's DOS mode. The high-color version of Virtual Pool 2 will not run under Win 98, but a warning window detailed the problem and pointed the user to Interplay's Web site for an update. Overall, gamers should find DOS games much less of a hassle under Win 98 than under Win 95.

Behind the desktop, Win 98 adds support for some 1,000 new devices, including such game-centric goodies as force-feedback controllers, 3D accelerators, and DVD-ROM. It also boosts support for such emerging technologies as USB (Universal Serial Bus), Web TV, broadcast-video cards, and the simultaneous use of multiple modems and video monitors.



You can run DOS games such as Virtual Pool 2 in Win 98...


Help Topics
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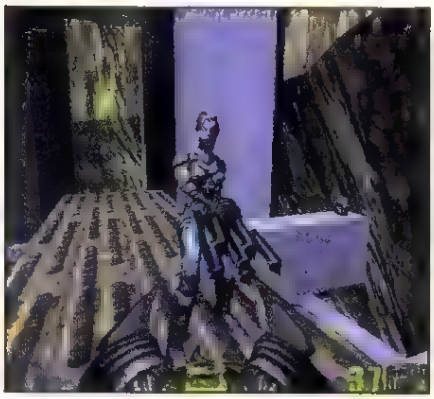
Important
You cannot play this version of VRSports Virtual Pool 2 in Windows 98 using color settings greater than 256. An update is available from the program manufacturer that will allow you to play in full 16-bit color resolution. To play using 8-bit color, you must change your Windows resolution to 256 colors before starting the game. For information on changing color resolution, type colors on the Windows Help Index tab.
Note
If you use the in-game menus to change to more than 256 colors, the game may exit with an error message stating that you must reinstall Virtual Pool 2. However, you do not need to reinstall. Restart the game and you should be able to continue at the resolution you were using before you made the change.
For information about updates to this version of Virtual Pool 2, visit the VRSports Web site at http://www.vrsports.com or call (714) 553-6678

...but it's still a hit-or-miss proposition.

It's difficult to assess this early in Win 98's release how Windows game performance will be improved by the new 32-bit program modules, as well as by the accelerated CD ROM driver and other speed tweaks. For games such as Unreal, booting up seemed so much faster that it felt like I'd upgraded my processor.

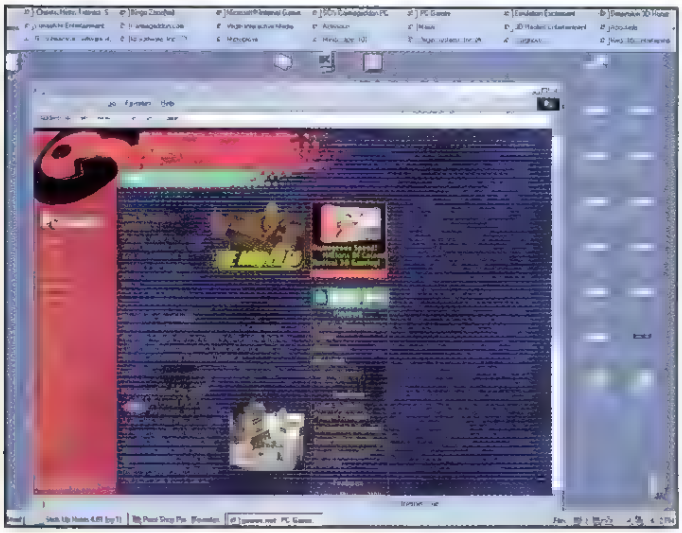
An exception is the processor-gobbling Active Desktop, an IE4 innovation that allows you to have live Internet pages or applets installed on your desktop and regularly updated. As nifty as it is to have desktop access to your favorite chat zone (if you have a full-time Net connection) or have immediate access to the latest updates on the *PC Games* Web page, this feature is a resource-drain.

Drag-and-drop creation of custom menu bars will give gamers obsessed with their favorite mod sites maximum information about recent updates. Pull the Quake Body Shop's URL (from either Netscape or IE) into a drop down menu bar, and you automatically add the site to the menu. And Win 98 will automatically red-light the icon to indicate when new content has been added since your last visit. It's a real time-saver if you spend time cruising multiple sites only to find out there's nothing new under the URL.



Full Windows games such as Unreal will likely benefit from Win 98.

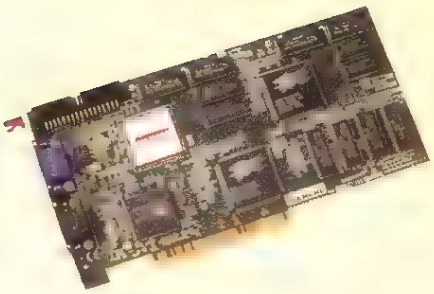
Windows 98 may be surfing in on a crest of litigation, but it's no also swam OS. With new tools, a new interface, new functionality, and new hardware support, the $89 Win 98 is serious about supporting gamers.



URLs can be pulled directly into the menu. The red-icon highlight indicates a site that's changed since your last visit.

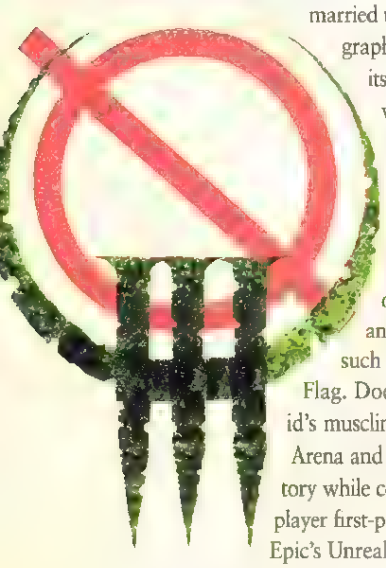
GAME WIRE

At the Wire



Quake III Terminated

According to a new .plan file by id honcho John Carmack, Quake III as we knew it is dead. Originally envisioned as a pinch-hitter in id's release schedule to keep FPS fans happy until Trinity pops two years from now, QIII was to use Quake II's game and network technology married to the Trinity graphics engine. In its place, id is now working on a mostly multiplayer animal called Quake Arena, consisting exclusively of deathmatch and team games such as Capture the Flag. Does that mean id's muscling in on Rocket Arena and JailBreak territory while ceding its single-player first-person legacy to Epic's Unreal engine? "We hope to satisfy a large part of the network-gaming audience with the out-of-the box experience," Carmack said in the .plan. Stating that single-player gameplay design requires rich visual detail that robs his game engines of frame rate, Carmack says he will not pursue new "aggressive graphics technologies" unessential to multiplayer level design. He does intend for Quake Arena to have a soloplay component, but expect it to be a ranking ladder against bots. Quake III publisher Activision will publish Quake Arena, although that title hadn't yet been cleared by its legal department at press time. A release date has not been set.



et tu, Brøderbund?

Not even Riven could keep Brøderbund from posting a $2.5 million to $3.3 million loss in its third-quarter financial statements. Now, the Novato, California–based publisher has sold all its assets to The Learning Company in a $420 million deal that, pending stockholder approval, will close in September. It's not known how the sale affects Red Orb, Brøderbund's year-old division famous for such hits as Riven, Journeyman Project 3, and Last Express—Learning Co. executives said they're still evaluating their options. A Red Orb spokesperson says that the division could continue on as is, be reorganized under the Mindscape or SSI banners—already Learning Co. divisions—or be sold to another publisher. Games in production (Prince of Persia 3D, Extreme Warfare) are continuing without interruption, and no staff reductions are planned, says the spokesperson.

Clan Cancellation

After months of full-color ads, Warcraft Adventures: Lord of the Clans has been snuffed. Reports surfaced as early as last January that something was amiss with Warcraft II veteran Chris Metzen's game. That's when Blizzard brought in Steve Meretsky, a 15-year game-industry vet (The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, Zork Zero), to look at WA frame by frame, puzzle by puzzle. Blizzard's plan at the time was to tweak things here and there, but "no major overhaul" was intended. Well, things must not have gone the way Blizzard hoped because now the whole project is canceled. According to PR manager Susan Wooley, Blizzard wasn't happy with WA as it was, and it would've taken a new engine and a new 1999 release date to revive confidence in the game. By that time, they were afraid, gamers would say "Ho-hum, this is last year's stuff."

After much deliberation, Warcraft Adventures has been axed.

Compaq Adds Voodoo II

Do you want Voodoo II with that computer, mister? Compaq is adding the Diamond Monster 3D II (8MB version) as an option on its Presario 5600 series PCs. Compaq representatives say the computer maker is serious about its "Built for You" custom-configuration plan and added Voodoo II as a response to consumer demand. Gamers can purchase systems specifically tailored to fit their needs and have the system delivered in 7 to 14 days. Prices start at $1,999.

Battlezone Gets Sequel

Although it was whispered at E^3 that Activision was working on a sequel to its well-received Battlezone, publisher confirmation of the project proved elusive—until now. At press time, *PC Games* learned that Pandemic will develop the game for Activision. Pandemic is a new design house founded by Activision vets Andrew Goldman (director of the Battlezone project) and Josh Resnick (the producer of MechWarrior 2 and Dark Reign). Neither Pandemic nor Activision staffers are saying what Battlezone 2 will look like—an open question because Pandemic's also working up a radically different play experience for Dark Reign II (see Covert Ops).

ThrustMaster Force

Following up on the solid NASCAR Pro Racing Wheel, ThrustMaster is planning an end-of-the-year release for the force-feedback version, the $180 NASCAR Force GT. This unit looks just as well constructed as its predecessor. Stay tuned for a full review.

—George T. Chronis and Danny W. Lam

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FINAL FANTASY VII
Now for the PC.

Finding Materia

You'll have to master harnessing the life force of the semiorganic Materia and casting powerful spells if you wish to live long in the worlds of Final Fantasy VII. And you'll have to find, buy, or fight for most of the Materia in the game. We've put together a list of where to find some of the core Materia. This isn't a complete list; we've left out some of the basic, easy-to-find Materias. But if you're the type who doesn't like an adventure to be spoiled, read no further.

MP Plus: Purchase at Cosmo Canyon/Mideel.
HP Plus: Purchase at Cosmo Canyon/Mideel.
Speed Plus: Gold Saucer, a Battle Arena item.
Magic Plus: Bottom of the ladder in the Coral Valley Cove beyond the Forgotten Capital (Disc 2).
Luck Plus: Ancient Temple (Disc 1).
EXP. Plus: Purchase at Gold Saucer's Wonder Square.
Gil Plus: Purchase at Gold Saucer's Wonder Square.
Enemy Away: Gold Saucer, win this at the Chocobo Square races.
Enemy Plus: Gold Saucer, a Battle Square item.
Chocobo Lure: Purchase from Billy in the barn at the Chocobo Ranch.
Preemptive: Gold Saucer, a Battle Arena item.
Long Range: Found in the Mythril Mine.
Counter Attack: Caves in Mt. Nibel.
Slash-All: Found near a snapping plant in the Ancient Forest.
Double Cut: Found in the wrecked underwater plane.
Protect: Found in the garden next to Aeris' house.
W-Magic: Found in the last dungeon (Disc 3).
W-Summon: Gold Saucer, a Battle Arena item.
W-Item: The south end of the tunnels beneath Midgar (Disc 2).
All: Sector 7 Slums.
Magic Counter: Gold Saucer, win this at the Chocobo Square races.
MP Turbo: At the Ancient Temple (Disc 1).
MP Absorb: Shop at Wutai, during Yuffie's subquest.
HP Absorb: Chest in the attic above the cat room in Wutai. You must complete Yuffie's subquest first.
Added Effect: Cosmo Canyon, found in the Gi Tribe's cave.
Final Attack: Gold Saucer, a Battle Arena item.
Sneak Attack: Gold Saucer, win this at the Chocobo Square races.
Added Cut: The "map" area before the snowy field (Disc 2).
Steal: Find in the sewers (Disc 1).
Morph: Ancient Temple (Disc 1).
Deathblow: Path in the jungle area near Gongaga Town.
Mime: Cave beyond the mountains in the Wutai Area.
Earth: Purchase at Kalm Town.
Restore: Near the reactor during Cloud's first mission.
Heal: Purchase from Kalm/Gongaga Village.
Revive: Purchase at Junon or Costa del Sol.
Seal: Purchase at Junon.

Mystify: Purchase at Cosmo Canyon.
Exit: Purchase from Rocket Town.
Poison: Shinra HQ, chest near a Save Point and Jenova.
Barrier: Purchase from Rocket Town.
Comet: Found in the City of the Ancients.
Time: Purchase from Gongaga Village or Rocket Town.
Destruct: Purchase from Fort Condor (Disc 2) or Mideel.
Full Cure: Room behind the shop at Cosmo Canyon (Disc 2).
Shield: In the lake area of the final dungeon (Disc 3).
Choco/Mog: Listen to the Chocobos at the Chocobo Ranch (Disc 1).
Shiva: Rescue Priscilla from Bottomswell at Junon (Disc 2).
Ifrit: Kill Jenova Birth aboard the cargo boat (Disc 1).
Titan: Check the ruined machinery near Gongaga Village.
Ramuh: Check the alcoves in the Chocobo-racer's room.
Odin: Open the safe in the Shinra Mansion at Nibelheim.
Leviathan: Win from Godo at the Pagoda of Five Mighty Gods in Wutai.
Knights of the Round: Ride a Gold Chocobo to an inaccessible island in the North Eastern Sea.
Bahamut: Ancient Temple (Disc 1).
Kjata: In the forest past Bone Village.
Phoenix: Win the Huge Materia Simulation Battle at Fort Condor (Disc 2).
Neo Bahamut: Found in the Whirlwind Maze, on the same screen with the Save Point, near the bottom ledge (Disc 2).
Hades: Found near the ruined helicopter in the wrecked underwater plane (Disc 2).

Exploring Final Fantasy VII's Worlds

Exploring the lands of Final Fantasy VII is crucial to your success, and mastering the use of each vehicle and raising the appropriate Chocobo (riding fowl) will dramatically improve your abilities. This guide will walk you through the basics of using vehicles and, more importantly, of breeding Chocobos.

Vehicles

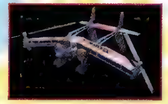
You'll come into possession of several different vehicles during your adventure. Some are harder to acquire than others, but acquire them you will. Here's a brief rundown on the vehicles, their features, and where to find them.

Land Buggy

This rough-and-tumble buggy will come in handy when you're trying to get through impassable terrain. You'll be able to hop in and out of the buggy, so explore as much as possible. Don't worry about losing it—it has a built-in tracking signal. This vehicle can be found at Gold Saucer.

The Tiny Bronco

The Tiny Bronco is Cid Highwind's private seaplane. Once you've acquired it, you'll be able to skim shallow waters. But in its damaged state, it won't fly. The Tiny Bronco is perfect for exploring the westernmost continent. You'll find it in Rocket Town.



The Highwind

The mighty Highwind is one of the fastest airships in all the lands. It can soar miles above the plains of Midgar, all the way across the western sea to the city of Wutai. The Highwind will take you just about anywhere in the game, provided you have a firm place to land. You'll come across the Highwind at the beginning of Disc 2.

The Shinra Submarine

This Shinra-owned submarine will be put to good use by Cloud and gang. It's actually one of the best mini-games in Final Fantasy VII. You'll dive, surface, and fire torpedoes at pursuing Shinra submarines, all while trying to find sunken treasure. Did we mention you have to steal this submarine from a heavily guarded naval base? You can steal the Shinra submarine at the Underwater Reactor in Junon (Disc 2).

Chocobos

The Chocobo is a domesticated riding fowl, bred for different terrain. These color-coded birds are useful for finding some of the most important secrets in the game—the Knights of the Round Summon Materia, for example. Here's a list of each Chocobo's abilities, along with spoilers on how to breed different kinds.

Yellow Chocobo

The Yellow Chocobo has no special abilities.
Breeding Tip: This default Chocobo can be found everywhere, and there are several variations on it. They are Good Chocobo (found in tracks near Gold Saucer), Great Chocobo (found outside Mideel), and Wonderful Chocobo (found near Icicle Inn on the northern continent).

Blue Chocobo

The shifty Blue Chocobo can cross over rivers and shallow waters.
Breeding Tip: To breed a Blue Chocobo, mate a Good Chocobo with a Great Chocobo using the Carob Nut, which you steal from the red dragon-type creatures near Bone Village. It may take a while, so keep trying.

Green Chocobo

The tricky Green Chocobo can scale the highest mountain easily.
Breeding Tip: Same procedure as with the Blue Chocobo. You'll either get a Blue one, a Yellow one, or a Green one. Be patient, and keep trying.

Black Chocobo

The mysterious Black Chocobo has the abilities of both Blue and Green Chocobos. **Breeding Tip:** Race your Blue and Green Chocobos at Gold Saucer until they're both Class-A Chocobos. Then mate them using a Carob Nut and you'll have a Black Chocobo.

Gold Chocobo

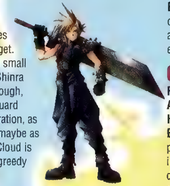
Little is known about this legendary Chocobo. But it's rumored that the Gold Chocobo can cross even the deepest ocean.
Breeding Tip: Feed 10 Sylkis Greens (purchase them from the Chocobo Sage) to both a Black and a Wonderful Chocobo. Now race them both until they're Class-A Chocobos, then mate them using the Zeio Nut (steal it from the goblins on Goblin Island). You'll now have the Gold Chocobo.

Meet the Final Fantasy VII Characters

As Cloud Strife, you'll search the lands of Final Fantasy VII with your newfound friend Barret Wallace. Yet, the two of you cannot possibly save the world alone. Finding suitable allies is the key to surviving in these dangerous lands. You'll recruit, find, or rescue interesting companions, each with separate backgrounds and specialties. Be careful, though—you'll never know which ones to trust and which to keep your eye on. This listing of party characters you'll encounter will give you an inkling of what to expect from whom.

Cloud Strife

Profession: Soldier
Age: 21 **Birthplace:** Nibelheim
Height: 5' 7" **Weapon of Choice:** Swords
Bio: Cloud Strife is a young soldier searching for answers in his very disturbing memories of a past he can no longer forget. Cloud grew up in Nibelheim, a small country town miles from the Shinra capital of Midgar. Once old enough, he joined SOLDIER, the elite guard employed by the Shinra Corporation, as a means to find an answer, or maybe as a way to forget the past. Yet, Cloud is never quite aware of Shinra's greedy intentions until it's too late.



Barret Wallace

Profession: Leader of AVALANCHE
Age: 35 **Birthplace:** North Corel
Height: 6' 5" **Weapon of Choice:** Gun-Arms
Bio: Having fought the Shinra Corporation for as long as anyone can remember, this battle-scarred warrior shows no signs of stopping. Barret, fed up with the monopolizing ways of Shinra, started the renegade unit known as AVALANCHE. Having just lost his wife in a tragic accident, this bitter soldier will stop at nothing to see Shinra destroyed.

Aeris Gainsborough

Profession: Merchant
Age: 22 **Birthplace:** Unknown
Height: 5' 3" **Weapon of Choice:** Staffs
Bio: The young, beautiful, and mysterious Aeris meets Cloud in Midgar, where she works as a merchant selling flowers. Being somewhat attracted to him in ways she cannot yet comprehend, she decides to join him in his quests, leading them both into an alliance with AVALANCHE.

RED XIII

Profession: Unemployed
Age: 48 **Birthplace:** Cosmo Canyon
Height: 3' 9" **Weapon of Choice:** Headdress
Bio: This enigmatic beast with fiery-red fur looks as though it might be the formidable offspring of a cougar and a buffalo. Its sharp claws and fangs and superhuman intelligence make it a creature to be reckoned with. Not much else is known about RED XIII, not even its true identity.

Cait Sith

Profession: Fortune Teller
Age: Unknown **Birthplace:** Unknown
Height: 3' 3" **Weapon of Choice:** Megaphones
Bio: Cait Sith is a tiny feline-type creature that rides on the back of a giant stuffed toy, one he magically brought to life. Working at the amusement park Gold Saucer, Cait Sith longs for some excitement in his life.

Cid Highwind

Profession: Pilot/Mechanic
Age: 32 **Birthplace:** Unknown
Height: 5' 8" **Weapon of Choice:** Spears
Bio: The brave-hearted Cid is one of the greatest pilots to ever take to the skies. And with wrench in hand, he can fix just about anything that doesn't breathe. Cid is mellow and cool-headed, except when it comes to his dreams of exploring the cosmos.

Tifa Lockheart

Profession: Member of AVALANCHE
Age: 20 **Birthplace:** Nibelheim
Height: 5' 5" **Weapon of Choice:** Gloves
Bio: Tifa grew up with Cloud in Nibelheim and has deeper feelings for him than she'd like to admit. Joining AVALANCHE to help put an end to Shinra's manipulation of the planet's precious MAKO energy, Tifa quickly finds herself in a war to save the planet. Her fearsome fists can decimate almost any enemy.

Yuffie Kisaragi

Profession: Ninja/Materia Hunter
Age: 16 **Birthplace:** Wutai
Height: 5' 2" **Weapon of Choice:** Shuriken
Bio: Coming from a long line of Ninja ancestors, Yuffie tries to uphold the family tradition, but at times she gets a little carried away by her sense of adventure. Being sneaky, dishonest, and selfish, she is not one to be trusted. But with her Super Shuriken and special skills, you'll want her on your side.

Vincent Valentine

Profession: Unemployed
Age: 27 **Birthplace:** Unknown
Height: 6' 0" **Weapon of Choice:** Handguns
Bio: This shadowy figure's seeming frailty hides a surprising power. Vincent is dark, stern, and mysterious. He has a long, disturbed past with Shinra, Inc., and has no intention of letting up on his quest to make them suffer.

Combat, Weapon, and Spell Tips

While some of these tips may seem obvious, they are included to give non-FFVII players a taste of its depth and combat strategy—and even veterans will find some useful hints. The first section offers basic advice on fighting monsters; then we take a look at some of the better weapons and where to find them. Finally, we offer some monster-crushing spell-and-weapon combos. Let the battles begin!

Paper, rock, and scissors

Most monsters are resistant to at least one element (fire, ice, lightning, etc.). So fire will always do more damage to ice-based creatures. Keep in mind that you won't always be aware of monsters' resistance right off the bat. The key is to pay careful attention to an unknown creature's decrease in damage while battling.

Your silly weapons cannot hurt me

Some monsters are invulnerable to normal weapons and can only be harmed by spells or the more powerful Ultimate Weapons. The Ultimate Weapons are hidden throughout the game and are usually very hard to find. Use your most powerful spells against these semi-immortal beasts.

Your stupid spells are no match for me

Just when you thought your spells were the best thing you had going, here comes an anti-magic creature immune to all of them. Don't sweat it; just remember which creatures are immune, and hit them with your most powerful weapons.

Weapon Tips

We don't want to spoil the secret powers of the game's elusive Ultimate Weapons, so here's a list of some of the more all-purpose weapons that can improve each character's battle prowess.

Enhance Sword: Very powerful but hard to find. Have Cloud equip this sword immediately. It'll distribute damage to a number of different creature-types, and it can hold a large amount of Materia. **Location:** Buy it at Junon after Meteor shows up.

Fairy Tale: This is one of the best weapons for Aeris. Not only will it deal some intense damage, but it'll also hold more Materia than almost any other weapon in the game. **Location:** Buy it at Junon after Meteor shows up.

Solid Bazooka: Barret loves his bazooka. Just have him equip it right away and watch the enemies drop like flies. **Location:** Buy it at Costa del Sol after Meteor shows up.

Centclip: Again, a weapon valued because of its high Materia storage. The Centclip can only be equipped by Red XIII. **Location:** Buy it at Costa del Sol after Meteor shows up.

Dragoon Lance: Valued for its ability to damage many types of creatures, regardless of their resistance. It can only be used by Cid. **Location:** Buy it at Junon after Meteor shows up.

Oritsuru: Found later in the game, this weapon is worthless if you haven't invited Yuffie into your ranks. It does a fair amount of damage and holds a ton of Materia. **Location:** You can find the Oritsuru behind the flames at the Da-chao Mountains.

Crystal Glove: One of Tifa's premier spell-casting weapons. It holds a lot of Materia, allowing you to stock Tifa up with high-level defensive spells. **Location:** Buy this at Mideel.

Silver Rifle: Vincent is deadly once you find his Silver Rifle. Use it against all types of creatures—it kills indiscriminately. Its only drawback is lack of Materia storage. **Location:** Buy this at Junon after Meteor shows up.

Gold M-Phone: Cait Sith's Gold M-Phone is no laughing matter: this trumpet is a great all-around weapon. **Location:** Buy it at Costa del Sol after Meteor shows up.

Spell Combos

Prior to combat, your weapon, armor, and accessories must be equipped with Materia, the source of all your spell-casting. Because you'll never have enough room to bring it all into battle, you'll need a wide range of spell combos.

The "All" Materia combo can be combined with both offensive and defensive Materia. This will allow your spells to affect an entire group of monsters or your entire party. Quickly combine "All" Materia with "Restore" Materia for a healing spell that will cure your entire party.

Weapon Combos

Certain Materia installed on weapons, armor, and accessories can lead to some powerful combinations. Try attaching the Double Hit Materia to Cloud's Rune Sword, a combo that will allow you to hold a lot of Materia and do 2x normal damage.

Final Attack: Combine Final Attack with Revive for a Return from the Dead combo. Each time you die, you'll be brought back to life, but you can only use this once per level.

W-Materia: There are a few Materias known as the W-Materias: the W-Summon, W-Item, and W-Magic. Use these in conjunction with your attacks; they allow two combat actions for the price of one (two summon spells in one turn, two items in one turn, two magic spells in one turn, etc.).

MP Absorb: Use MP Absorb with Knights of the Round. Not only will you destroy your opposition, but you'll also gain back all the MP you spent, giving you a free summon spell.

Sneak Attack: This is best used with Knights of the Round. Sneak Attack will gain you an attack early in the battle, and Knights of the Round will make it a very short battle at that.

Added Effect: A sweet combo is the Added Effect/Hades combo. Hades benefits highly from the Added Effect, allowing it to use one of its condition spells on your opponents.

Engines cont.

So what's the difference with portals? Instead of creating levels connected by individual rooms in one huge affair, the engine concentrates on making rooms (cells) independent zones, then linking them to other rooms through invisible portals. So, rather than forcing the game engine to process geometry data about the room you're in and every room you have access to, the Portal Engine only processes data about the room you're in and the portals you can see through.

Prey can be played in first- or third-person modes.

According to Prey project leader Paul Schuytema, once your CPU isn't forced to calculate all that extra geometry, resources are freed up to do more in the room you're in. For example, in Prey, you can interact with every object—be it a TV remote-control on a coffee table or the wall of a warehouse. But because programmers have the extra resources, they can make interaction with every wall and rafter in the warehouse dynamic, not scripted. Shoot at different locations, and the results will be different—the whole warehouse may come down around you, or just the wall.

Portals can also be used in gameplay. In Prey, they'll be linked to portable generators. A player drops one of these landmine-looking devices and it opens up a portal. Drop another generator, and there's now a jump gate between the two portals. You can jump or shoot through the portals, and you can also use a rocket blast to blow other players through portals and into lava pits or other perils.

Since 3D Realms is looking toward the future with its Portal Engine, the baseline system requirement for this 3D-only game is a 266MHz Pentium II. Prey will have its own 3D audio format using MMX protocols and will support A3D and DirectSound. 3D Realms says the game should be ready in spring 1999.

Nocturne

Developer Terminal Reality—known for Terminal Velocity, Monster Truck Madness, and MTM2—is hard at work on an engine that'll bring a new level of realism to the genre.

Nocturne, the name of both the game and its engine (known as Demon until trademark issues arose), will be the first game with volumetric lighting and fogging, says Terminal Reality president Mark Randel.

It's a fancy way of saying that rather than shadows being pre-rendered as in current games, Nocturne will be able to cast shadows in real time from multiple light-sources. Walk under a streetlight while carrying a lantern, and you'll cast two shadows. Set the lantern down and stand in front of it, and your shadow will stretch the length of the scene.

Fog works similarly. Rather than being static, it blows in and curls all around you. Just as quickly, another gust blows the pea soup away.

Such effects go a long way toward enhancing the game's creepy, eerie atmosphere. Described by Randel as a cross between *X-Files* and *Men In Black*, Nocturne has you traveling to different locations to hunt down and eliminate werewolves, vampires, zombies, and other supernatural frights. As is the trend these days, it'll incorporate some RPG elements.

Nocturne may be the most film-noirish game around.

Shadows cast in real time enhance Nocturne's atmosphere.

For example, your character will get better at certain skills as you progress.

While other plot and gameplay specifics were a bit hazy (the game's not due til late next year), the demo we saw was impressive, especially since all the rendering was done in software. Nocturne will require an MMX processor, with a P166 targeted as the baseline system. You'll need a Pentium II for hi-res effects.

"A lot of what we've been doing has been working with the Quake II engine so that it will do what we want it to do," he says. "But Unreal already does 90 percent of what we want [the game engine] to do. That means our guys can concentrate more on the gameplay stuff than the tech stuff they've been dealing with."

Even though Broussard had nothing but good things to say about id and its technology, he said the Duke team is already seeing a big difference with its first results on the Unreal engine.

Broussard made no comment about licensing-cost differences between the two engines; nor did he discuss whether the fact that both games are being distributed by GT Interactive was a factor in negotiations. Representatives of id were not available for comment at press time.

—George T. Chronis

BOOKMARK THIS

The Web's full of sites devoted to the gaming greats. Here are some of our favorite in-your-face URLs we bookmarked this month. If you visit or run a site that deserves mention, drop us a line at *sites@pcgames.com*.

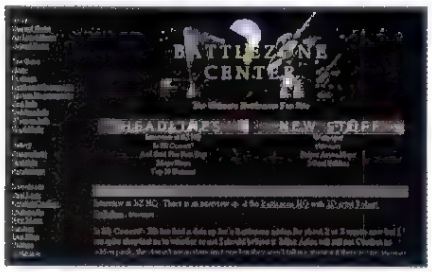
By Danny W. Lam

Site of the Month

Battlezone Center

www.missionyard.com/battlezone/

It's a Battlezone out there, and this one wins the war. The BC's a very complete site on the popular Activision game: Besides all the usual



stuff like news, stories, screenshots, patches, and unit/building/weapon info, you can get new maps, utilities, joystick configs, and wallpaper. You can also use the ICQ Players' List to hook up with fellow gamers. If you love the game, you'll love the Center.

Planet Unreal

www.planetunreal.com/

Unreal news, notes, tips, tweaks, FAQs, files, and server lists. Beautifully designed, easily navigable.

Starcraft.org

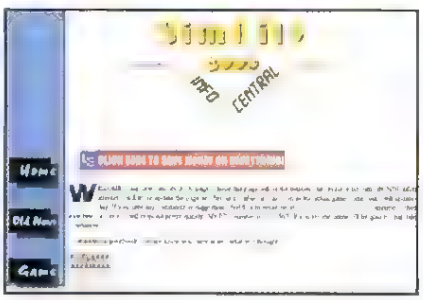
www.starcraft.org

Possibly the most comprehensive and humongous Starcraft site ever: news, archives, species analysis, ladder info, polls, stories, ICQ links, "StarStats," references, and much more.

Starsiegeplayers.com

www.starsiegeplayers.com/es3/

Read about the Starsiege universe, check out screens, hang out in the lobby. The place to be for Starsiege fans.



SimCity 3000 Info Central

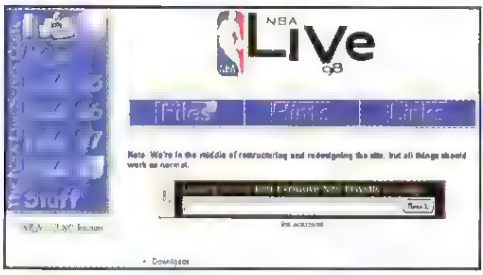
www.neurogamer.com/sc3000/

Get full info on SC3K, check out the game's toolbars and screens, nab the downloads, and learn all about the history of the SimCity series.

Half-Life: The Better Half

halflife.totally3d.com

Fulfill your Life's needs with everything from a story synopsis to an overview of the technology behind Valve Software's promising first-person shooter.



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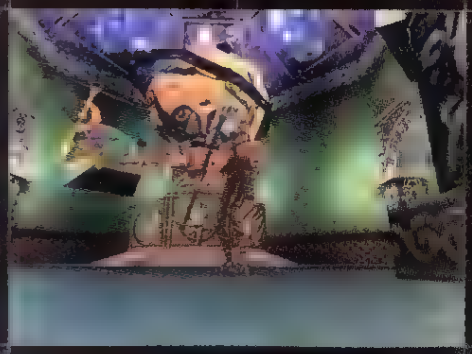

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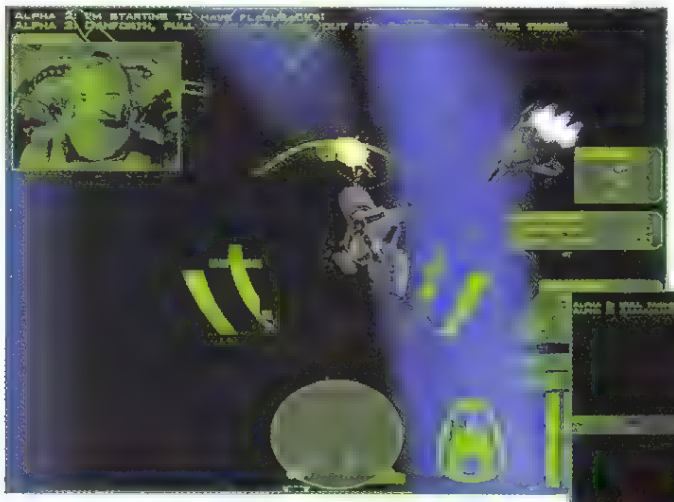
Maps, mods, missions, and more

They Killed Kenny—Again

Those precocious kids from *South Park* sure get around, don't they? Last month I spotted Kenny and Cartman on Quake II servers all over the country, and this month they're protecting a vital shipment of Cheesy Poofs on its way to Earth in an excellent Descent: Freespace mission by Dr. Dynamo.



Cartman's got your back in the *South Park* missions.

The mission is incredibly well done—its opening briefing has "Commander Kenny" explaining that there's a Cheesy Poof shortage, and it's up to you to make sure the Cheesy Poof transport makes it to Earth. Of course, the Kenny voiceover is completely unintelligible, but the text tells you what you need to know.

Your wingmates are the rest of the *South Park* crew, and they get their hilarious quotes in. Kyle says "Hey, it looks like one of those Etheropians" when the enemy's sighted, Cartman has his Nam flashbacks, and there are plenty of "Kick ass, dudes" and "Sweeeeet" comments to go around. It's not the toughest mission ever made (though it isn't easy saving the Cheesy Poofs *and* Kenny), but there are plenty of hard ones around.

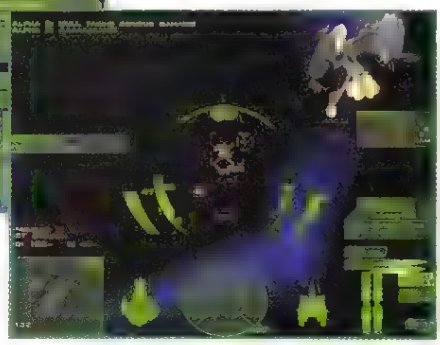
For unwinnable Freespace challenge, play Sedge's intense The Line. It re-creates *Babylon 5*'s Battle of the Line scenario beautifully, from the powerful mission-intro through the in-game dialogue (all taken from the TV movie *In the Beginning*). You really get that doomed feeling as capital ships subspace in while you're watching your wingmates drop like flies as wave after wave of Dragons appear. I also really enjoyed The Manhattan Project by Justin: Great end-mission wrinkle after a good battle.

These are just a few of the dozens of user-created Freespace missions I've played lately. Congratulations to Volition, Inc., for developing such a robust and well-documented editor. Barely a month after Freespace hit the streets and started consuming all my free time, missions started appearing in droves to consume more of my free time.

Sure, some of them have typos here and there, most don't bother with voiceovers, and errors pop up occasionally, but the overall creativity and wide range of mission types will keep you downloading for months. (Most missions are just 50K without sound add ons, 1MB with.)

You'll get everything from straight-up dogfighting missions to tough multiplayer missions to long and involved campaigns with plots that sound like they're right out of an expansion pack (e.g., Star Killer's "Eradicate the Hammer of Light" campaign). If you haven't finished Freespace yet and don't want to ruin any surprises, you might want to hold off a while. Understandably, most designers favor the ships that appear later in the game.

The best place to score the missions and campaigns is at Xanadu's Descent: Freespace Mission Archive (**xanadu.ml.org/freespace/**). The site has a Top 10, a review and scoring system, news, and new missions practically every day.



A screenshot can't quite convey how hectic it gets during Sedge's *Babylon 5* mission.

Xanadu's Archive, the other Freespace Web sites, and the growing number of mission designers out there suggest this game is building an online community that's here to stay. If Volition just fixes the multiplayer problems, Freespace and its editor could be the beginning of a franchise. In the meantime, hit the afterburners and try to save Kenny.

Playing a map, mod, mission, scenario, or campaign that's doing you right? Tell TheWeasel all about it at theweasel@pcgames.com.

Installing and Launching Freespace Missions

Put the Freespace mission files (name.FSM) in your C:\Freespace\Data\Missions directory. If the mission includes sound files, put them in one of the three C:\Freespace\Data\Voices directories (the README will tell you whether the sounds go in Briefings, Debriefings, or Special).

To play the mission, launch Freespace and go to the Tech Room. Click on the Mission Simulator, then on either Single Mission or Campaign Missions, depending on what you downloaded.

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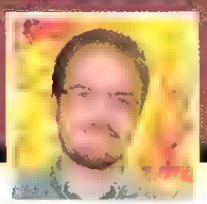
THE PLAYER



I fear the KISS principle will result in same-old, same-old gameplay

STEVE KLETT

Keepin' It Similar, Stupid?

Leisure time is increasingly difficult to come by. With work, errands, classes, exercise, TV, movies, books, magazines, Web-surfing, and dates (Okay, so I'm being optimistic), it's a miracle we can come up with those 10 to 20 hours a week for gaming. And there are more games being made now than ever, resulting in more competition for our attention and time.

All this hustle and bustle is having an influence on the games hitting shelves today. It seems developers are applying a variation of the Keep It Simple, Stupid cliché—Keep It Similar, Stupid—to games. The action-game genre, especially first-person shooters, is the one most KISSed. The result, I fear, could make gaming on the PC a generic experience.

It used to be you needed to spend a weekend reviewing the manual for a typical PC game before you could even think of playing it. This was particularly true of flight sims and strategy games, but it even took some time to learn and get comfortable with the controls for some action games like Doom and Crusader: No Remorse. Now you can play just about any PC game with just a cursory glance at the manual, if you look at it at all.

On the surface, that sounds like a great thing, right? I mean, who wants to spend time reading a boring old manual?

Well, stop and think for a moment about how the games are being made so easy to play. Sure, most employ a clever interface designed to make getting into the games as effortless as possible. However, in many cases—particularly in first-person shooters—the simplicity is in the gameplay, which is, of course, the heart of a game. A good number of recent games employ remarkably similar conventions—the same control methods, in-game objectives, and puzzles.

The most recent, and perhaps strongest, example of this is Unreal. Once I finished the game and my senses had time to de-stress from the 20 hours of overload brought on by Unreal's beauty and special-effects prowess, I was left wanting more.

Why? At its heart, Unreal's gameplay isn't really any different from most first-person shooters'. It's virtually identical to Quake II's—find the exit, find the lever or button to drop the bridge, turn off the power generator, and kill the lame boss creature at the end. The mechanics are familiar, too—in fact, I use the same keyboard/mouse configuration for both. Other than prettier wrappings, the only item of substance Unreal has over Quake II is better monster AI. These pluses were enough for me to enjoy the game, but because of the underlying similarities, playing Unreal felt a lot like playing Quake II, when all was said and done.

The so-called Quake config is becoming a de facto standard among players and developers—even for some games outside the FPS niche. For instance, I can use my same basic Quake config to play Activision's Battlezone. (Though, in an exception to the rule, this game is an excellent example of where the simple interface and controls belie a nicely sophisticated game.) Then there's Acclaim's Forsaken, another beautiful game with generic gameplay trappings, and Rage Software's Incoming. Memorize the most basic Quake config—cursor keys for forward/back movement and left/right strafing, and the mouse to look and aim—and you can sit down and play most any new game without even opening the manual.

The games that buck this trend are few and far between. Interplay's Die by the Sword introduces some radical new gameplay concepts to the PC action genre in the form of rather sophisticated control of your sword-arm. Cyclone's upcoming Thief: The Dark Project looks like it may introduce some new gameplay concepts by requiring players to be stealthy.

We need more games that take gameplay risks—at the expense of technological innovation if necessary. New games are starting to have a familiar feel to them—there's an inherent sense of déjà-vu. And I suspect this is only going to become stronger as the upcoming crop of games based on the Quake II and Unreal engines start to emerge. Sure, these games will apply different stories, characters, weapons, and some technological tweaks to the engines, but will they offer any significant advances or twists in gameplay? Jedi Knight and Duke Nukem were fun—and successful—because they did offer something new, be it a lightsaber, Force powers, jetpack, or Holoduke. Who will be next to differentiate their game by offering something new for us to do?

Is The Player talking the same old smack? Let him know at The_player@msn.com.

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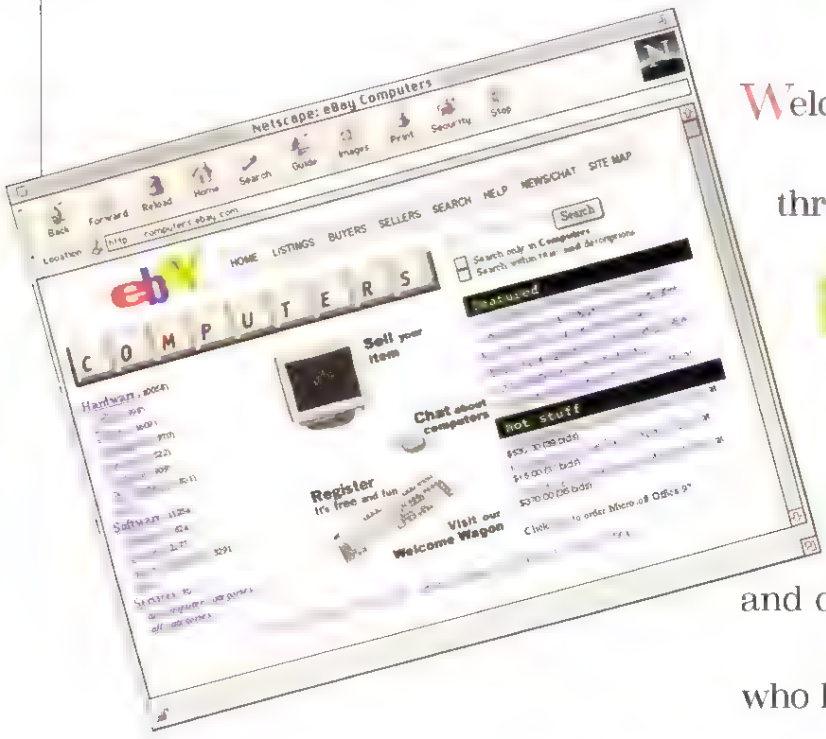

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The world is still waiting for the first great online RPG. Sony may have it.

It remains the ultimate prize in online-game development—the Holy Grail, if you will: A role-playing game played in a persistent online world, accessible 24 hours a day on servers capable of housing up to 1,000 players at once, featuring a complex society that evolves as the players shape its destiny. It's the massively multiplayer online RPG.

Oh, and also, it needs to be fun to play. People have to want to come back to it and get immersed in the world and its community to ensure a profit for the game's creator.

Wide-eyed RPG fans can't wait to get their hands on a great online world, and wide-eyed publishers can't wait to get their hands on the money those gamers would fork over for the right to play it. So where's the problem?

Previous attempts have met with decidedly mixed success. While MUDs have been offering text-only online RPGs for a long time, and titles like GemStone III have provided smaller-scale online role-playing, the first genuine entries into the "massively multiplayer" field have not scored big. The games still have their supporters, but interest in Meridian 59 has waned, and Ultima Online's release was derided by some gamers as buggy and by others as simply not much fun to play. Its maker, Origin Systems, faces a class-action lawsuit on the part of disgruntled software buyers who feel the game didn't deliver what it promised.

None of this has dampened the enthusiasm of the Sony EverQuest team or its supporters. A quick trip to **www.eqvault.net** turns up a surprising amount of stuff on guilds waiting to form and gamers already planning their online destinies. It's as if the UO refugees are camped out on the edge of town, waiting eagerly for the gates to be thrown open.

So while the debut of online RPGs may have been somewhat shaky, it's best to remember that Wilbur and Orville Wright were only airborne

By Daniel Morris

for 12 seconds during their first successful flight. Several developers following in the trail of (and hopefully learning from) UO and M59 have their sights set on grander accomplishments. They're working out how to offer constant play in a breathtaking fantasy environment with state-of-the-art 3D graphics, excellent play balance, and minimal lag. There are technological hurdles to leap and human sandtraps, like rampant player-killing, to address.

PC Games has been tracking the development of one of the most eagerly anticipated in the new wave of massively multiplayer online RPGs, EverQuest. With a devotion not only to stellar graphics but deep, rich, fantasy storytelling, EverQuest looks like it may well have what it takes to elevate this pioneering genre into a fun—and very profitable—reality.

San Diego Dreamin'

From its headquarters in the collegiate hills north of San Diego, 989 Studios (a Sony Computer Entertainment subsidiary formerly known as Sony Interactive Studios of America) is putting the finishing touches on a project that almost defies the word "ambitious."

Brad McQuaid, the project lead, is a lifelong fantasy buff whose vision of EverQuest is along the lines of a gigantic, Tolkien-style world of variety and depth. "It's the richness of that kind of world that gets my interest," he says. "That everything interconnects and relates to everything else."

EverQuest was designed from the beginning to be a game with a vast background, a wealth of historical, cultural, religious, and social detail. The idea was to provide gamers with the raw material for their role-playing, and to avoid any set plotlines or story. Like the pencil-and-paper universe of Dungeons & Dragons, it would instead rely on personal choices, interpretations, and interests to fuel

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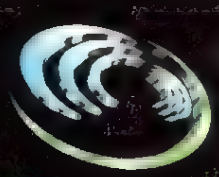

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the adventure, using the established parameters of the EverQuest world as the stage and starting point.

A lot of what's missing from Ultima Online, the Sony folks say, is a sense that something's happening beyond your character. Sony aims to make EverQuest adventures be "about" something, as opposed to just dropping you in a game world and unleashing you on a realm of bakers and fishermen and giant rats. In EverQuest, gamers will be confronted with an elaborate pantheon of gods and religions, an economic system of merchant classes, and clearly defined political and geographical dimensions. They'll quickly learn, for instance, that the northlands of Antonica are controlled by Barbarians, while the island continent of Odus is the sacred domain of the Erudite High Men.

Getting down and dirty with Pumpkinhead?

Norrath, the realm in which EverQuest is set, will be enormous. Currently, the gameworld consists of one hemisphere of a planet, complete with five continents and oceans.

A party stumbles into a burrow of nasties.

The biggest of the continents is Antonica, where most of the game's races originate. Across the seas are Kunark, an unexplored wilderness; Velious, an ice continent; Faydwer, the home of the Dwarves, Gnomes, and Elves; and Odus, the sanctuary of the enlightened Erudites.

But as EverQuest unfolds, its boundaries will expand to new continents, even new planes and dimensions. The designers will also be adding to the existing world as players evolve it. For example, if a powerful guild decides it wants to build a Guild Hall and gathers enough money to pay for it, they will be able to apply to the EverQuest designers. If approved, their structure will be drawn up and implemented into the game.

"Obviously there's a limit to how much customizability there can be," says McQuaid. "But we'll certainly be responsive and accommodating. We can even let the guild masters send us their own logos, and we'll include them in the game artwork for the Guild Hall."

That level of participation will ultimately be the key to EverQuest's success or failure. Forming parties is encouraged, as questing can often depend on the complex interrelationships of races, classes, and skills. A strong Warrior may find he needs the companionship of a healing Cleric, who in turn needs the Warrior to help him gain enough treasure to finance a temple. Parties will share experience

Day fades to night as a fireball briefly lights up the dusk sky.

THE CLASSES

EverQuest's 14 character classes provide a rich selection of gameplay options.

BARD: Song and dance and poetry, that's the Bard's bag... Well, it's a living.

CLERIC: The priests of Norrath's pantheon of gods. They're given the ability to heal and smite based on their continued piety and prayer.

DRUID: Nature-loving magicians who call upon natural manna for their powers.

ENCHANTER: A magic-user who specializes in the creation of magical items and weapons.

MAGICIAN: Magicians are more suited to summoning spells than to ass-kicking spells. Wizards knock things out; Magicians get things done.

MONK: Religious men dedicated to making perfect weapons of their bodies. They don't have much use for armor or weapons, but with the gods on their side, they get fists of fury.

NECROMANCER: As if Norrath didn't have enough problems, there's a class of evil Clerics devoted to raising the undead. Creepy.

PALADIN: The nicest guys in the world. Skilled knights dedicated to goodness. Eliot Ness in plate-mail.

RANGER: Tree-hugging warriors with druidic tendencies. The best bow shots in the land.

ROGUE: The class incorporating all skullduggerers, from thieves to assassins: people who like to lurk, leap, lock-pick, and back-stab.

SHADOW KNIGHT: Ever seen evil personified? These anti-Paladins wield big swords, big magic, and big bad attitudes.

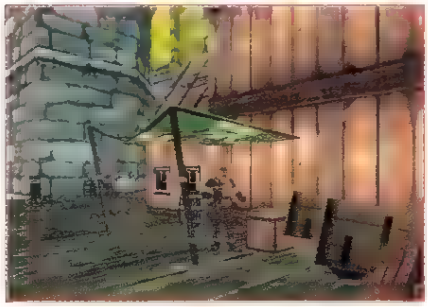
SHAMAN: The primeval analogy to the Cleric, usually found among the more tribal races.

WARRIOR: A born fighter, the Warrior gets a higher Hit Point bonus than the other classes.

WIZARD: The heavy artillery. These students of arcane power possess devastating magical attacks.

points gained in cooperative adventuring. The idea is to put a premium on communication and cooperation.

To facilitate the role-playing experience, the designers are making sure that EverQuest feels "real." Day cyclically fades into night, and highly realistic weather effects like rain, wind, and snow affect gameplay. There is an active economy, one in which every player takes part, and it will react along the realistic tenets of supply and demand. Travel can be a long and challenging process, and you'll need to eat and sleep to stay in top form. You'll have to weigh the pros and cons of paying for an inn or camping in the treacherous woods. To cross an ocean, you'll need to hire a ship (or find a mage with a super-teleport spell). Your character will age, though it's not yet determined whether characters will die with any finality.



Cities are incredibly detailed, with all of the flotsam and jetsam you'd expect cluttering the streets of a fantasy community.

Sony's other plans to involve players in the game world include the hiring of full-time game masters. These GMs will be equipped with fast tools for injecting themselves into the game as NPCs and will be catalysts for quests and role-playing.

"They'll be hanging around to add color and get things going," says McQuaid. "They can send you off on dynamic quests and help beginners get acclimated."

Newbies, especially, will want as much guidance as they can get dealing with EverQuest's scores of monsters (40 so far) and spells (over 600), not to mention its five distinct magical classes. GMs will also help motivate, inspire, and exacerbate the progress of players. They'll help kick-start your story and massage it once it's going.

"There's just so much to do in there," says McQuaid, "so many big quests, little quests, items to recover...we'll be sure the players are made aware of what some of them are, so they can dig into it."

Other ideas have come directly from rethinking flaws in previous online games. Player-killing (a major problem in Battle.net Diablo games) has been addressed rather interestingly in EverQuest. If players decide they want to participate in PK'ing, they can. If not, they don't have to. There's a toggle in character creation that lets you decide one way or the other. But if you decide to be "no-PK," not only are you invulnerable to attacks from other players, but you can't steal from them or otherwise take advantage of your invulnerability. PK characters get to steal whatever they can, just not from any non-PK characters. An option is being worked out to allow toggling your PK status on and off during the game to fit different situations.

Is this guy looking for a PK? He's going to be bummed if you're playing no-PK.

See and Do

The models for this graphically overwhelming world, ironically, are the text MUDs of yesteryear. But the evolution of 3D graphics since the first MUDs has allowed Sony to bring eye-popping visuals to the role-playing experience.

Polygonal characters are rendered using Direct3D-compatible accelerator cards (which are required to play the game). The depth of the visual presentation is total. When it's raining, each individual drop exists in the engine.

THE RACES

With 12 races to choose from and more on the way, EverQuest players will have an unusually wide variety of choices when settling on an alter ego to wander Norrath...

HUMAN: Standard attributes; your basic citizen.

BARBARIAN: A breed of Human from the harsh northern territories of Antonica, suited to war and unpracticed at social niceties. You know, like Schwarzenegger.

ERUDITE: Along with the Barbarian, a breed of Human, but one known for intellectual superiority and physical inferiority. They don't have much use for the other races of Norrath.

HALF-ELF: They're half Human and half Elf, blending the skills and disadvantages of both races.

WOODLAND ELF: Pointy-eared, physically slight, but with breathtaking dexterity. Woodland Elves are bright and charming.

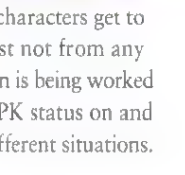
HIGH ELF: The stuck-up Elves. High Elves pride themselves on being a sort of intellectual royalty.

DARK ELF: These evil, dark-skinned subterraneans are gifted with perfect darkness vision.

DWARF: Everyone loves Dwarves! These short, brawny badasses are built like tanks, yet they're hard to hit.

HALFLING: The Halflings are the Dwarves' weaker, more agile cousins. And they probably can't drink as much beer.

GNOME: Gnomes prefer to live in their underground caves and keep pretty much to themselves.



TROLL: Yes, you can play as a Troll. They're eight feet tall, smell like a mountain of dung, and are about as smart as a plywood board. But boy, can they bust skulls.

OGRE: If life as a Troll doesn't suit you, you can try the Ogres. They're 10 feet tall, built like Mack trucks, and can't count to one.

Count on a mystifying array of area effects from the more powerful spells.

You can look up at the sky and watch drops hit you in the face or splash off the sword in your hand. Figures emerge from and recede into fog and darkness—unless your elven eyesight picks them out with infravision. Trees, hedges, structures, elevation changes, crevasses that light cannot penetrate…the attention to terrain and environment detail leaves the player with lots to soak in.

You'll have lots of perspectives to choose from, too. There are several camera-angles, and you can instantly switch from first-person to overhead to chase view and more. It's recommended that you learn the advantages and disadvantages of each view and learn to switch to the one best able to support you in certain situations. Anyone playing in the same view all the time is going to suffer for it.

For example, like in Jedi Knight lightsaber duels, it's wise in combat to go to the overhead view so that you have a broad outlook over the action and potential threats—unless you're engaging an enemy in close-up fighting, in which case first-person offers a cleaner look at where to strike. The chase view might be your best bet in dungeon exploration, giving you a chance to see little clues you may have missed in first person.

In any view, the dynamic lighting will wow you. The flicker of torch light, the creeping glow of sunrise and sunset, and particularly the magic effects are rendered with impressive realism. Fireballs and area-wide magic attacks unleash spectacular light shows—a Wizard throwing a fireball across a lake will see its angry glow move from illuminating his character to arcing through the air with a shimmering mirrored reflection on the rippling surface of the water.

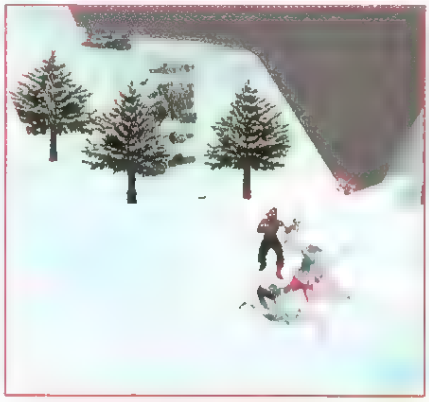
But Will It Work?

Whether there's an audience for a persistent-world RPG online isn't an issue; the only question seems to be, Will the things actually work?

There are a lot of hurdles standing between great ideas and great online RPGs. But 989 Studios is confident that it can handle them and points to an early online achievement as evidence.

Tanarus, the well-received cooperative tank-combat game, was Sony's first volley in the online market. Its success—and technological stability—will be the foundation for the EverQuest model.

John Smedley, president of 989 Studios' development, jumped onto Tanarus from his desktop PC and demonstrated the ease and reliability of the tank game. "It's a fun game," he says. "A lot of the fun comes from the cooperative nature, two teams going at it. They'll pay 10 bucks a month for a game like this." There are often hundreds of players on Tanarus at any given time.



An ice goblin engages adventurers. Chaos has never looked so pretty.

Which brings up a dicey question: What will EverQuest's cost system be, given that just about every online game is pursuing a unique model?

Smedley says the final details are still being worked out, but that EverQuest will be sold as a boxed game—they're thinking in the $50 range—and then a monthly charge will probably be assessed. Given the Tanarus model, it's likely to be a $10 a month for unlimited play.

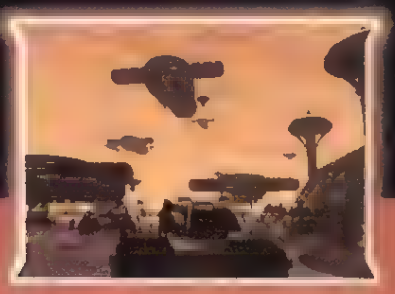
Unleashing a dynamically lit fireball.

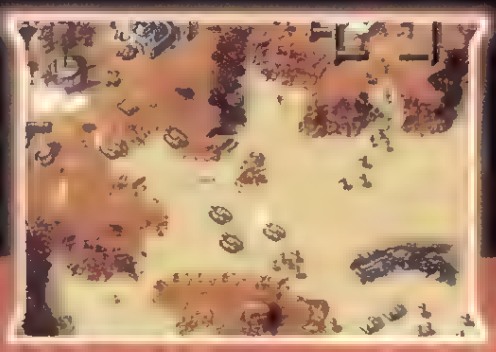
Smedley dismisses the grumbling of some gamers who object to a monthly charge. He puts it simply: "I would pay 10 bucks a month to play EverQuest. I think most people into a game like this would."

With Sony's backing, 989 Studios is definitely an outfit with deep pockets. The costs for establishing and maintaining the servers will be very high, and it's these costs that typically prohibit companies from pursuing their own ideas for large-scale RPGs. (Developers at Interplay, for example, freely admit that setting up a persistent-world server is cost-prohibitive right now. And like many developers, it's watching closely to see how EverQuest's model works out.) 989 Studios is ready to deploy servers quickly, depending on pre-orders.

So now it's up to the game's makers to prove that this genre can capture gamers and dollars. In scope, depth, and sheer resources, EverQuest is easily the most ambitious attempt so far. In a genre that so many want to see succeed, it's a strong contender to be the game that breaks through. ■

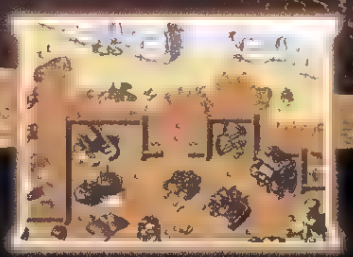
Recreated for the new millennium the classic Dune II returns





DUNE 2000

New High Color Graphics in 8 and 16 Bit.



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RPG

The Role-playing Renaissance

It's the season of the RPG as a number of high-profile games look to rescue the genre from its slump in recent years.

By Daniel Morris

The quality system in Asheron's Call allows you to customize character skills.

back to our hungry hard drives.

A glance at the ones we can't wait to unwrap...

Asheron's Call

Microsoft (www.microsoft.com/games)
Release: Early 1999

Character generation is skill-based in

ration, as opposed to simply being taught to you. Knowledge of rare or obscure spells could fast become a currency of power.

points, that character will offer benefits

rime combat.

"If we organize quickly we can defeat these things..." They'd better get started quick. (Asheron's Call)

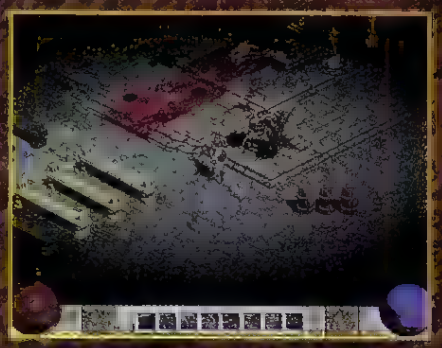
Baldur's Gate

Interplay (www.interplay.com)
Release: Winter 1998

Diablo II's new character-classes include the Amazon Warrior.

Gamers can play as one of five new classes: Amazon Warrior, Paladin, Necromancer, Sorceress, or Barbarian. You'll also have four new towns to explore, each adding its own piece of the puzzle to the involving quest.

As the game opens, three demons are found in Tristram after a convoy is pillaged. You have to find out whether that king of the bad



An all-new gathering of big, evil castles waits in the refurbished dungeons of Diablo II.

boys, Diablo, has reared his ugly head again. The sub-quests that elevate the role-playing dimension can branch in different directions, with different repercussions later on. Your decision to help one person and not another might result in gaining an NPC ally at a crucial juncture later—or having to realize that you've alienated an NPC whose you need his help. Wise choices could even benefit you with the free services of a normally costly mercenary.

A cheating-free environment on Blizzard's Battle.net (we can only hope) would also help human characters interact more cooperatively. For Diablo II, Blizzard plans to set up a persistent economy that hinges on truly rare items and artifacts. With a market for rarities in place, players could undertake quests to find specific items for trade.

Butt-kickin' for goodness: Your party sets out to tame the Forgotten Realms in Baldur's Gate.

You may have to stoop to becoming a post-apocalyptic grave-robber in Fallout 2.

...and menus that can make RPGs a tedious ... begin the game as the same character, then adapt and evolve that character in their own unique ways.

As the heir to a challenged throne, you'll ... old-fashioned might.

In the interest of simplicity, most of the gameplay functions are designed to reflect ...

...ut 2 team is crafting ... most crucially hailed ... and involving gameplay ... kind of gameplay experience ... unful-der of New Reno are wary when you ... some poking around.

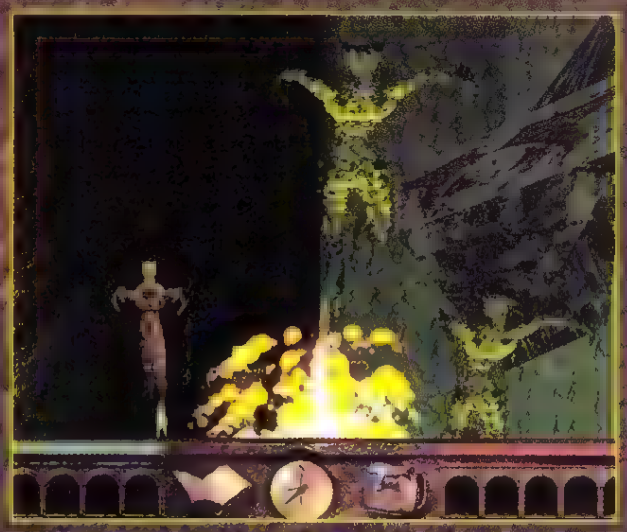
Two big additions are vehicles, which can now be located and driven around, and a detailed hand-to-hand combat system, which allows characters to specialize in unarmed combat. The game has also been made tougher, particularly in the endgame, which many players found to be a snap the first time around.

"We'll be sure the end of Fallout 2 isn't easy," says Urquhart.

Lands of Lore III

Westwood Studios (www.westwood.com)
Release: Fall 1998

The RPG most likely to steal the limelight from its gaudier competition is ...



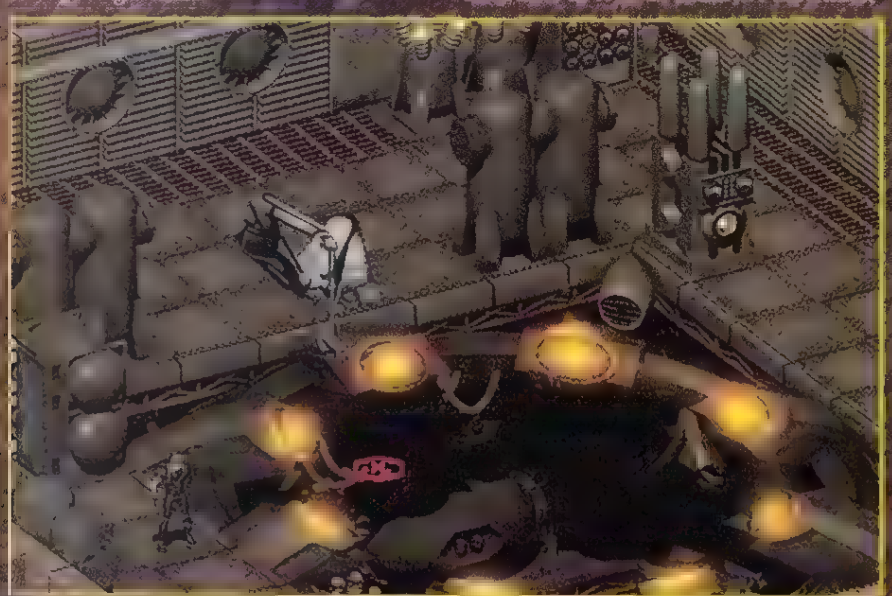
Voxel-based graphics render the nightmarish creatures of Lands of Lore III.

... and fought it, suffered some horrible ... Now when you encounter a beast, an entry ... weapons, magic, and even NPCs. This "common-sense summary" sounds basic, but ... RPG's immersive experience.

Return to Krondor

Sierra Studios (www.sierra.com)
Release: Late 1998

... world this season.



Fallout 2 mixes the post-technological world with the high-tech one. Here you've stumbled upon the remains of a reactor.

Return to Krondor's epic story will have you swashbuckling...

Sierra returns to Feist's land of Midkemia for Return to Krondor.

...and spell-casting in Midkemia.

You can count on a deep and involving storyline, and Return to Krondor sets you up with a world-sized challenge from the very beginning. The venerable Urbarian Church seeks a powerful discovery, a sword imbued with the power of the Light. The Lord of the Land is missing. Now it's up to you to recover the lost Sword, or else the country will be overrun by a flood of evil.

Rendering the imagination of Raymond [illegible] is a daunting challenge, but the graphic representation of Return to Krondor should live up to the task. The game will use the Build engine to provide a full 3D visual experience, with polygonal players and buildings in a real-time environment.

Ultima: Ascension

Origin (www.origin.com)

Release: Late 1998

Ultima: Ascension is a step away from the traditional Ultima style. This graphics-heavy entry will skew to a much more [illegible] adventure/role-playing gameplay, with a real-time 3D-graphics presentation and a minimum of character maintenance. While this time Origin does Diablo, it's [illegible] tradition of Ultima.

The game looks fantastic, but Origin hopes that [illegible] Ultima fans are willing to overlook its thinner role-playing dimensions and departure from established Ultima style. After all, there is the franchise name, there's the [illegible] and a chance to experience RPG combat. Moving away from number-crunching [illegible] Ultima has created a better step. What is, Origin is trying it can introduce a broad new audience to this venerable series.

Back to the Classics

The overall trend in this year's burgeoning RPG field seems to be a return to classic computer role-playing, the kind of [illegible] mental exercise that marked the best of yesteryear's graphically primitive games. Of course, the new 3D graphics technologies now allow developers to produce [illegible] of their stories.

As Interplay's Urquhart puts it, "You're probably not going to have a blockbuster [illegible] good one, you get a very loyal, hardcore [illegible] money enough to do [illegible] for the rest of the genre.

If so, the genre looks healthier now than it ever has before.

This isn't your father's Ultima.

STATE OF THE GAME

We show you the hottest upcoming [illegible]—from fall '97 to the end of the century

It's never been a better time to be a gamer, especially if you're a hardcore gamer with a tricked-out gaming system and the bucks to make it more so. The games keep getting better and better, the technology is advancing at breakneck speed, and the designs are becoming deeper and more immersive.

The 1998 Electronics Entertainment Expo (E^3) gave the industry a chance to gather for a peek at tomorrow's games, but that alone didn't satisfy us. *PC Games* hit E^3 with a mission—to provide you with a look at where gaming is headed over the next year and where the season's major releases fit in.

We took an in-depth look at the breakthroughs being made as well as tackled some of the innovative concepts that are bending genres inside and out. We're not listing every game we saw at E^3; we're highlighting the rule-breaking games leading the way in each genre, those that might redefine what can be achieved. The rest stand strong as the most promising titles the industry will have to offer over the coming months and years.

ACTION

Content for years to let graphics and multiplayer gameplay carry a title, gamers have grown a lot more sophisticated in their taste for action shooters. Spotting a chink in the id fortress, developers are emphasizing story, character, setting, and single-player development. The new class of action games balances blistering, beautiful graphics with involving heads-up gameplay, trying to make the mental gymnastics as compelling as the twitch gymnastics.

HALF-LIFE

By Valve for Sierra Studios
Due: Any day now
What's New: Half-Life is anticipated not just for its eye candy but for its brain food, more

so than just about any action title of the upcoming year. The plotline has commanded as much attention as its polygonal prowess—you're stuck in a top-secret research facility where experiments with extradimensional travel have torn open a rift between our world and a terrifying parallel universe of monsters and mayhem.

Situational awareness in Half-Life is more reminiscent of real life than computer life. When we gave it a run-through, it presented a chilling adrenaline rush we've rarely experienced in a shooter: Fleeing some beasties, one of us ducked down a hall and came to an exposed-elevator shaft dead-end. A quick look behind showed the nasties gaining, then a desperate mouse-look up and down the shaft to see if escape was possible revealed a decrepit ladder. Just in time, a running leap got us to the ladder, and the stymied monsters were grasping at air at the precipice. Thrilling.

With its expanding plot and seamless transitions between stages of the game (no obvious level breaks—you just naturally segue into a new section), Half-Life is the best early example of action titles developing into stronger, smarter games. At E^3, Valve also announced that the popular Quake mod Team Fortress would be the centerpiece of the Half-Life expansion pack.

We Say: It's about time 3D action games understood it's about more than colored lighting and cool textures. Unreal's started it; Half Life may lead the way.

Messiah

By Shiny for Interplay
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: As bold a concept as you're likely to find in any action title, Messiah places you in the role of a cherubic avenging angel out to rid the world of sinners and scum. You can possess the bodies of mortals and walk a few bloody miles in their shoes, or stick around in your pint-sized form and bring God's wrath down in style. It's the first game to use Shiny's new engine, which essentially calculates how many polygons your machine can handle and still run smoothly.
We Say: Amen.

Requiem: Wrath of the Fallen

By Cyclone Studios for 3DO
Due: Christmas 1998
What's New: Apparently the industry's getting spiritual: Requiem is a battle between Heaven and Hell, with you playing the Angel Malachi. This first-person shooter features an engine built from the ground up. Lush, futuristic environments, character interaction, and interesting angelic powers could make this a gift from above.
We Say: Hallelujah—but can't we play as Lucifer?

Duke Nukem Forever

By 3D Realms for GT Interactive
Due: Winter 1999
What's New: Out with the Quake II engine, in with Unreal (see Game Wire, page 29). They say they'll get more of the effects and control they want for just a two-month delay. What they showed was still impressive (check out the AVI on our CD-ROM). Duke still has the attitude, the environments look more interactive and fun, and stomping alien guts in the wasteland of Las Vegas should be a riot.
We Say: Duke is arguably our favorite alter ego of all time, and his continued politically incorrect adventures are high up on our Must Play list.

Max Payne

By Remedy Entertainment for g.o.d.
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: These Finnish developers have a clear affinity for big, bold action movies from the likes of John Woo and James Cameron. Max Payne's plot sounds like one: new drug

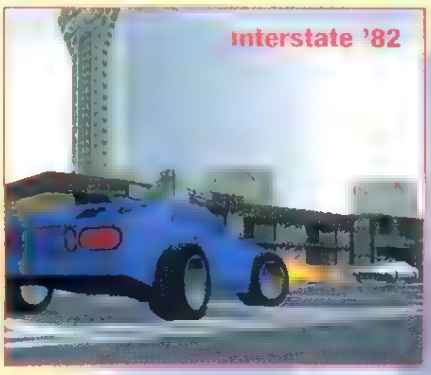
decimates New York, druggies kill DEA agent Max Payne's wife, Max framed for cop's death, and with nothing to lose, Max goes about cleansing the mean streets. This game doesn't have aliens; it has bad mobsters and crooked cops, grungy NY alleys and sparkling high-rises, modeled guns that behave and sound as they should, excellent lighting effects (a guy lights up a smoke and his face glows, then the smoke curls convincingly around his head), and cool comic-book–style cut-scenes.
We Say: Give us the 9mm Beretta and step back—we've got a job to do.

Heretic II

By Raven Software for Activision
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The Quake II engine is still good enough for some people, including Quake II's publisher, Activision. Heretic II switches to a new third-person perspective for a much more Tomb Raider–esque experience. Spell-casting effects and maneuvering benefit immensely from the perspective switch, and the environments are stunning.
We Say: Raven Software's on a roll.

Interstate '82

By Activision
Due: Winter 1998
What's New: It ain't the '70s no more—it's the hard-knuckled, corporate-raiding '80s, and along with the new perspectives on peace, love, and economics come new perspectives in gameplay. Choppers and motorcycles are part of this new package, as is an early-'80s soundtrack that had better include the Talking Heads' "Burning Down the House." Oh, and you can get out of the car now.
We Say: More vehicles, more toys, more tunes... We can't wait to rev it up.



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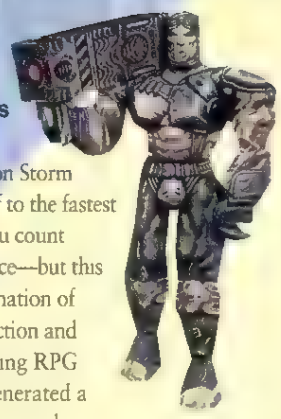
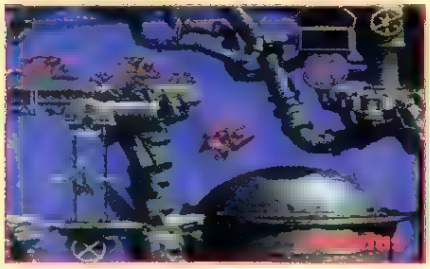


By Ion Storm for Eidos
Due: Christmas 1998
What's New: Ion Storm hasn't gotten off to the fastest start—unless you count pretty office space—but this shooter's combination of time-traveling action and character-building RPG elements has generated a trail of media buzz as long as Romero's hair.
We Say: Enough with the buzz—bring on the game!



Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus

By GT Interactive
Due: November 1998
What's New: Abe, whose sidescrolling Oddysee enthralled gamers on both the PC and console, doesn't get much of a rest. He now has to save Mudokons who have been forced into shedding tears for the main ingredient in Soulstorm Brewery's bottled product. Incredible graphics and creative gameplay should make Oddworld: Exoddus a must-play for admirers of innovative games.
We Say: Abe's Oddysee was a captivating and refreshing break from typical guns-and-gore fare. This is one sequel that raises no doubts from us.

Tomb Raider III

By Core Design for Eidos Interactive
Due: November 1998
What's New: Lara Croft, the lady who's done more than anyone to keep the fires of PC gaming stoked, returns for a third outing in TRIII. Basic gameplay will be similar to that of the first two adventures, with some graphical enhancements (birds flying toward the camera, splashes when Lara hits the water). But all-new motion-captures, environments, weapons, and vehicles should keep the battlin' Brit's heartsick fans enraptured for a new go-'round.
We Say: With successful games, a mainstream media presence, and a forthcoming major film, Tomb Raider is arguably the most bankable franchise in gaming.

Prey

By Ritual Entertainment for 3D Realms
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: Prey's unique engine uses 3D Realms' much-lauded Portal technology (see Game Wire, page 29) to provide a new visual experience. The story, which centers on a Native American's struggle against alien invaders, should offer a new twist on gameplay, too.
We Say: The wait's been long, but it looks like it'll be worth it.

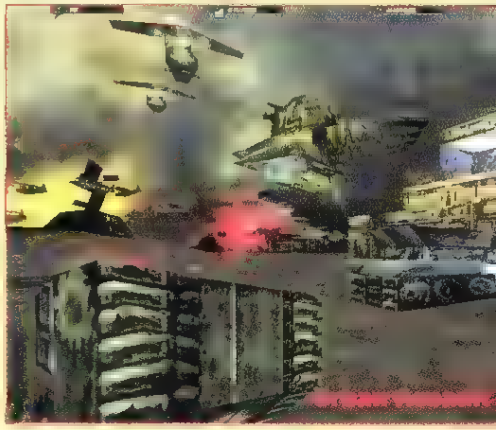
SiN

By Ritual Entertainment for Activision
Due: Now
What's New: Okay, so using the Quake II engine isn't exactly new anymore, but SiN's focus on single-player mode, which involves branches based on your decisions at crucial moments, is a very fresh twist on 3D shooters. Besides, it looks pretty, and that Levelord guy can crank out the rockin' levels.
We Say: We're getting tired of capitalizing the "N" in SiN, but we're looking forward to holing up with the game.

X-COM: Alliance

By MicroProse
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: For God's sake, man! The X-COM universe goes first-person shooter! Assume the mantle of an X-COM operative in a tactically demanding bug-hunt against the bulb-headed alien menace.

We Say: We can't imagine a first-person shooter environment more rife with nerve-wracking potential than X-COM's. We're keeping our fingers crossed.



Urban Assault

By TerraTools for Microsoft
Due: Any day now
What's New: An attempt to meld the genres of first-person action and real-time strategy, à la 3DO's Uprising and Activision's Battlezone. You not only command and direct a military operation, you've also gotta twitch with the best of them to score your kills.
We Say: Real-time action/strategy is the next breakout genre, and if Urban Assault gets it right, we could be looking at a pioneer.

Wheel of Time

By Legend Entertainment for GT Interactive
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: Complain a lot about lack of story in first-person games? Well, Robert Jordan's renowned fantasy universe is the fuel running the Unreal engine. More RPG than shooter, this genre-bender could be a groundbreaker.

We Say: Our shrine to Shannara will look mighty good over the monitor where Wheel of Time will get its workout.

Starsiege: Tribes

By Dynamix
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Squads. The developers of this multiplayer, online-only game saw how Quake clans evolved and built a game that requires team interaction. One person's the commander, assigning roles as the team battles others in various scenarios.
We Say: Beautiful 3D environments and voice communications could make this an online winner.

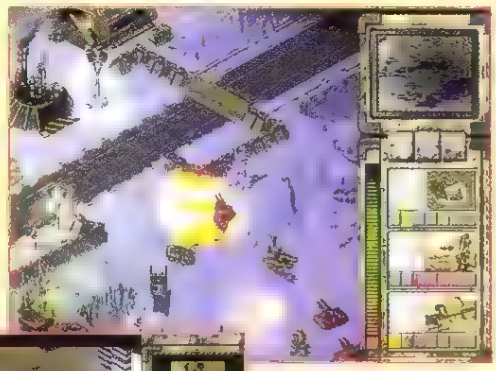
Amen: The Awakening

By Cavedog for GT Interactive
Due: Summer 1999
What's New: The house that built Total Annihilation turns its attention toward the first-person genre with the goals of creating an innovative interface and telling a story as action-packed as a Richard Donner flick. Look for an orchestral score, a four-act story, specific damage effects (if you get something in your eye, your vision's blurred), RPG and puzzle elements, and monstrously huge environments where everything's to scale.
We Say: They broke new ground in strategy; why not in action?

COMMAND & CONQUER: TIBERIAN SUN

By Westwood Studios for Virgin
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The game that single-handedly made the RTS genre mainstream has returned to reclaim its throne. Enough with the add-on packs; Tiberian Sun is an all-out sequel, sporting entirely refurbished graphics and stunning new 3D maps, an all-new roster of units to build, and added depth to its proven gameplay.

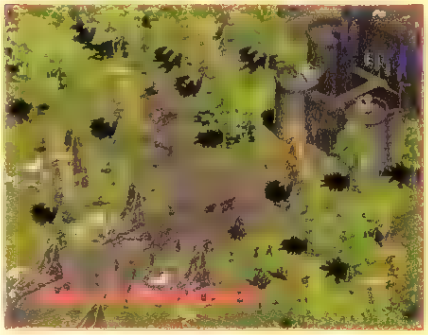
Westwood's MegaVoxel technology is unleashed on dynamic terrain that will crater when struck, burn when forests are flamed, and carry poisonous fumes on the wind.



The new units include such goodies as jump-jet infantry who can rocket from point to point to cross rivers or leap walls, Stealth Generators that allow for devastating sneak attacks, and the ferocious Firestorm Defense, for when someone's a-knockin' and you don't want to let 'em in.
We Say: Red Alert should be a distant memory once Tiberian Sun is deployed. Total Annihilation set a new standard for real-time strategy (and garnered the popular vote for *PC Games*' Greatest Game of All Time), so Westwood has a high bar to clear. But they look ready to reinvent the genre they created.

Age of Empires II

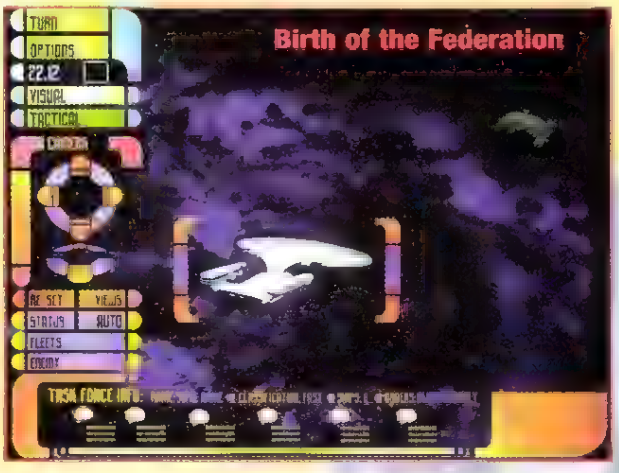
By Ensemble for Microsoft
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: A new age for the empires. Leaving behind the early eras of human history, Age of Empires II lets you try your hand at crafting a society from the feudal beginnings of the Dark Ages to the full flower of medieval culture. Fortifications and architecture are of a more impressive scale, and Ensemble promises better AI and unique units for each culture.



We Say: We're big fans of the original, and letting us play around with knights and such sounds like heaven. Serf's up, dudes.

Star Trek: Birth of the Federation

By MicroProse
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Taking RTS to the *Star Trek: TNG* universe! Lead the Federation, Klingons, Ferengi, Cardassians, or Romulan Star Empire from early interstellar travel to transwarp drives.
We Say: Too early to call, but if MicroProse pulls it off, this could be a new epoch in *Trek* games, especially if the culture models are well researched and believable.



EVOLUTION

This genre, the other 400-pound gorilla in the gaming industry, enjoyed a bit of a renaissance in 1997 and early 1998. While traditionalists may have decried it, the shift toward real-time, graphics-intensive strategy could not be stopped—it couldn't even be contained. E³ showed us the next wave of real-time wonders, including dazzling sequels to established blockbusters along with a surprisingly strong selection of turn-based titles that prove that conscientious wargaming is nowhere near extinction.

M.A.X. 2

By Interplay
Due: Summer 1998
What's New: M.A.X. was a critically praised game that died commercially, so you could say there's an incentive for Interplay to do more than rest on its laurels. M.A.X. 2 is a more action-oriented game than the original, designed to take advantage of the game-world's rich futuristic environment.
We Say: M.A.X.'s poor reception was one of our biggest letdowns last year, and we can only hope that the sequel draws more gamers to this intriguing and deep sci-fi wargaming series.

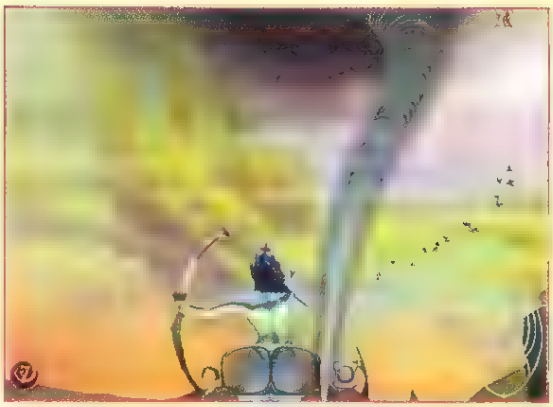
Myth II: Soulblighter

By Bungie
Due: Winter 1999
What's New: The concept of sleep at Bungie...because just as Myth: The Fallen Lords is establishing itself as one of last year's strongest strategy titles, its full-blown sequel is almost with us. Believe it or not, Myth II will be an even more impressive visual experience than its predecessor, as more detailed terrain and light-sourcing advance the Myth series to a higher graphical plateau.

We Say: There's no reason for a personal life when you're making games like these, so Bungie should stick to the grindstone.

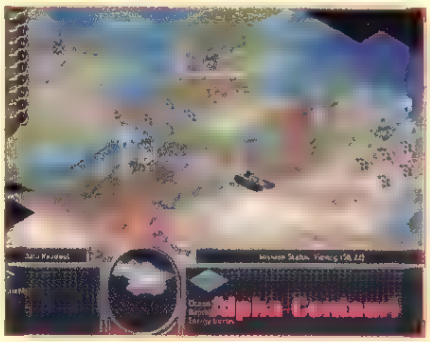
Giants

By Planet Moon for Interplay
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: Made by the team that did MDK, Giants is an intriguing strategy game that features some of the coolest effects we've seen, like a tornado (above center) lifting cows off the ground. Goddesses known as Sea Reapers created the world, had a vision that a tech force would invade, and created a giant to protect themselves. Of course, the giant got free will, the tech force (Meccaryns, who look suspiciously like the MDK guy) arrives guns ablazing, and the game's on. Play as any of the three sides and eliminate the others by any dastardly means available for over 40 levels. The interesting race differentiations and pretty, playful graphics make this one stand out.
We Say: One of the best games at the show. Too bad Interplay wouldn't let the developers keep the cool Citizen Kabuto name.



Alpha Centauri

By Firaxis for EA
Due: Late 1998
What's New: Some call this one the real Civilization II sequel as Sid Meier heads into space. The genre's high priest takes his Civ-style brand of immersive strategy and crashes it on an alien planet, where you'll have to compete for elbow room and maintain a settlement in war and peace. We're salivating over the seven races to choose from, 3D terrain that can be terraformed, and built-in multiplay.



We Say: The heck with polygons. At the risk of sounding kinda creepy, we'd love to be stranded in space with Sid Meier, anytime.

Dark Reign II

By Pandemic Studios for Activision
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: Brand-new developer Pandemic Studios is bringing a full-3D engine to bear on Dark Reign II, modeled after the advances in the Heavy Gear II engine. A comprehensive mission designer will let gamers mold their own battles with fully polygonal environments and units and a freely positionable camera.
We Say: Dark Reign's success can only be trumped by the addition of a polygonal 3D world, and the editor should be icing on the cake.

Spearhead

By Zombie for Interactive Magic
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Highly realistic M1A2 sim that accurately models both the tank itself and the US Army ground-attack doctrine.
We Say: Probably the closest thing to actually sitting in the commander's seat of an M1A2.

The People's General

By SSI
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The Panzer General II engine is applied to a speculative near-future war against China. The maps may feature the most gorgeous art of any game this year, and the availability of projected weapons based on real-world research programs will make for exciting turn-based wargaming.

We Say: Panzer General II meets tomorrow's headlines. Can't wait.

Railroad Tycoon II

By PopTop Software for g.o.d.
Due: Winter 1998
What's New: Railroad Tycoon II is hotly anticipated by all gamers starving for great resource-management sims. Surprisingly, its strongest feature seems to be beautiful graphics—let's hope the gameplay matches.
We Say: The esteemed Railroad Tycoon sounds like a surefire basis for a stellar sequel. We hope developer PopTop brings this train into the station.

Force Commander

By LucasArts
Due: Winter 1999
What's New: *Star Wars* goes real-time. The hope is that LucasArts can apply the richness of the *Star Wars* universe to create an involving story complementing the vicious, innovative combat. But let's be honest—story's really just a bonus when you're sending landspeeders up against AT-ATs, isn't it?

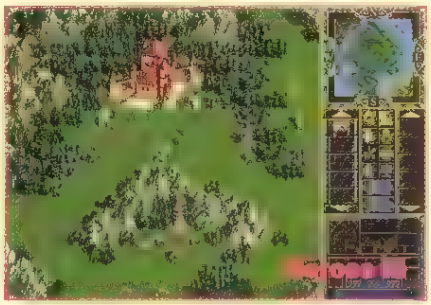
We Say: The *Star Wars* universe is the world's coolest toy set. Time to play rough.

Dungeon Keeper II

By Bullfrog for Electronic Arts
Due: Winter 1998
What's New: Peter Molyneux's gone, but it looks like DK is in good hands. DKII's 3D graphics, especially in first-person view, are excellent, and there's an emphasis on more varied play, including plenty of built-in player scenarios. Dungeon Keeper addicts ourselves, we'd grovel like whipped orcs for a chance to play a deeper, prettier sequel, especially if it maintains the original's bizarre sense of humor.
We Say: Evil can be so rewarding.

Heroes of Might and Magic III

By New World Computing for 3DO
Due: Christmas 1998
What's New: New World's overhauling the graphics: the pre-rendered 3D images can now be seen in 800-by-600, 16-bit color; and the combat screen is twice as big. The addictive, turn-based gameplay is still there, and of course there are more towns, monsters, heroes, and a full suite of multiplayer options.
We Say: We're ready for a trip to Erathia.



ADVENTURE

In ironic contrast to the growing importance of story in action games, next season's adventure games seem to be skewing more toward the visceral, twitch elements of play. Tomb Raider's success has a lot to do with it, and a new merging of the action and adventure genres is giving us graphically rich games that challenge traditional thinking about what adventure games can be. One thing's for sure—we're just about ready to declare the Myst-clone dead and gone.

STAR TREK: SECRET OF VULCAN FURY

By Interplay
Due: Winter 1999
What's New: Using what Interplay calls "Scroller" technology, Vulcan Fury will deliver beautiful, lifelike graphics—unaccelerated. The characters' motion-captures include excellent movement and facial expressions, like Sulu's lip slightly curling as he scoffs at something you've said, or Spock's famous eyebrow-raise. The Scroller tech can also attach sounds to animations, produce ambient sounds on the fly, and stream audio—all in 16-bit. Oh, and of course there's the intriguing story written by original series–writer D.C. Fontana, which involves Romulans, Vulcans, peace talks, an assassination, missing High Councilors, and other intrigues. One of the original show's directors, John Meredyth Lucas, directs the game, and the *Star Trek* cast (Shatner, Nimoy, Kelly, Doohan, Scott, Takei, Koenig, and Nichols) provides the voices.
We Say: This could be the most true-to-form *Star Trek* adventure yet, especially given Interplay's good track-record (Star Trek: 25th Anniversary and Judgment Rites).

Trespasser

By DreamWorks Interactive
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: An engine where everything—from a rock to a log to a gun to a T. Rex—has true physics modeling. Immediately after *Lost World*, you're stranded on a familiar island (Site B) with the singular goal of getting out alive. Everything you see in the dynamic ecosystem (15 square miles were modeled), you can pick up (if it's not too heavy) and use. The brilliantly rendered, "thinking" dinosaurs look as good as in the flicks, and the puzzles (two were designed by Spielberg) satisfy in that they're logical, reality based, and generally have more than one solution.
We Say: Trespasser's graphics are absolutely top-drawer, its engine is unique, and its atmospherics could provide for a thrilling place to while the hours away. Lara, look out.

Good & Evil

By Cavedog for GT Interactive
Due: Christmas 1999
What's New: Cavedog and Humongous founder Ron Gilbert (Maniac Mansion) gets his hands into a game for adults again. Good & Evil has elements of three genres: the storytelling and puzzle-solving of adventures, the character-building of RPGs, and the combat of real-time strategy. Different levels will have different goals, such as killing an evil king, killing one person but no one else, or finding certain items. You'll use portals to flash between lands, and each land will be populated with different types of people, like cavemen, kung-fu fighters, and spaghetti-western gunslingers. Your party will grow to as many as 60, and it'll be up to you to decide whom to pick for a particular mission.
We Say: There are some talents in the industry you trust, and Gilbert's one of 'em.

King's Quest: Mask of Eternity

By Sierra Studios
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The venerable King's Quest series, which established the guidelines for a lot of the adventure games we've played and loved, moves in a new direction with Mask of Eternity. This entry focuses more on action gameplay than before, with in-close sword fighting and ranged-bow attacks keeping you alive in your quest.
We Say: This perennial favorite should satisfy long-time King's Quest fans as well as a new, twitch-oriented clientele.

Gabriel Knight III: Blood of the Sacred, Blood of the Damned

By Sierra Studios
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Out with the FMV, in with a brand-spankin'-new 3D world in which to maneuver Gabriel Knight, the star of this title's two brilliant predecessors. A lush visual feast accompanies you (and voice actor Tim Curry) through a chilling mystical mystery.
We Say: The Gabriel Knight series has been wowing us for years, and this installment will be the most graphically advanced by far.

Dark Side of the Moon

By SouthPeak Interactive
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: You've inherited your uncle's space-age mine, and the first thing you have to do is explore it to solve a baffling murder. This quirky sci-fi mystery features Video Reality, the FMV technology that debuted in Temujin. It offers far more control over navigation and object-interaction than most adventure games allow—even non-FMV point-and-clickers.
We Say: Not much buzz accompanied this one to E^3, but its graphics are definitely at the front of the adventure pack.

Skies

By SegaSoft
Due: Spring 1999
What's New: An online adventure/RPG that lets you play as a flying mythical beast in a

massively multiplayer fantasy realm. You'll build your beast's skill set by completing in-game quests and such, and you'll interact with other gamers' beasts as you explore the online world. Rather than studying stat lists to see how you've improved, you simply watch your character grow bigger and more formidable as you advance.

We Say: Based on a very different concept from the slew of other persistent-world games, Skies may be the inspiration massively multiplayer games need.

Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine

By LucasArts

Due: Winter 1999

What's New: LucasArts is finally doing something interesting with the Indiana Jones license. It's 1947, the Cold War's getting chillier, and the Soviets are searching for the five parts of a device that will open an interdimensional gate. You're the whip-wielding, snake-fearing Indy out to stop them. This 3D (accelerator required), 16-chapter, action/adventure hybrid stresses mechanical puzzles over combat, and there will be multiplayer co-op scenarios.

We Say: Go ahead and cue the inspirational soundtrack—we can't wait to bust out our whips.

Beneath

By Activision

Due: Spring 1999

What's New: Taking the Tomb Raider model a step further, Activision's cavern-crawling entry into the newly vital third-person action/adventure market pits you as an adventurer exploring the catacombs beneath the Earth's surface.

We Say: Tomb Raider fans looking for a subterranean fix will find realistic motion-captures and pretty environments throughout Beneath.

SPORTS

Sports publishers are learning quickly that it's a 3D world now. The huge interest in 3D acceleration has made just about every serious sports title either go 3D or get benched.

Additionally, sports series now live and die on the strength of the pro licenses and celebrity endorsements they can attract. And in this super-competitive but lucrative field, a new emphasis on realistic sim-style gameplay (both on the field and in the manager/owner chair) is keeping sports developers on their toes in their search for a pennant-winning PC game.

KNOCKOUT KINGS

By Electronic Arts

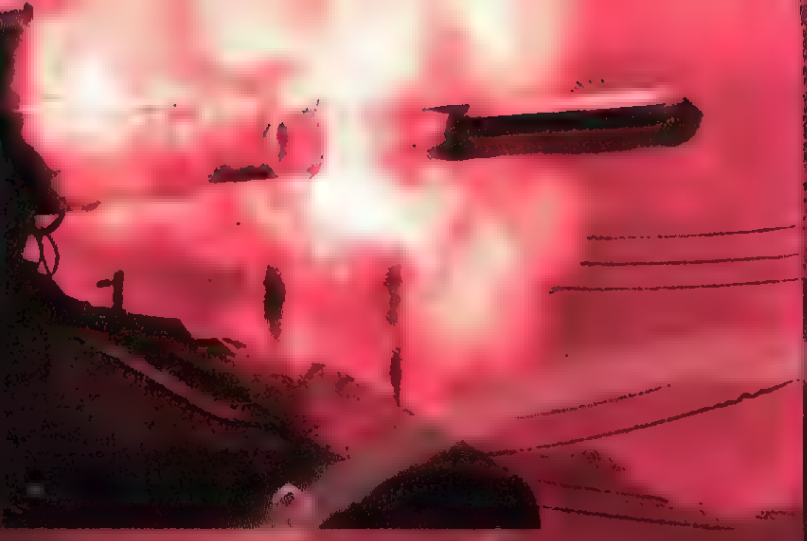
Due: Fall 1998

What's New: Let's face it, the "sweet science" hasn't had a decent PC representation in...well, ever. EA's getting ready to rumble with a game that includes such grand combatants as Muhammad Ali, Evander Holyfield, Sugar Ray Leonard, Oscar de la Hoya, Joe Lewis, Jack Dempsey, and Rocky Marciano. (No Tyson, no Foreman.) 3D graphics will accurately represent the ring and fighters (and maybe Charlie Sheen in the front row), with a fighting model that's not only realistic but downright fun and easy to get the hang of.

Beyond the excellent, motion-captured graphics, Knockout Kings could be a giant smash because it might tap a previously unexploited market. The Deer Hunter phenomenon woke up the industry by demonstrating that an idea successfully delivered to a broader audience means commercial profit.

Sports is the ideal arena in which to make the next Deer Hunter–style breakthrough, and EA Boxing's attention to capturing the unconquered PC ring could pay huge dividends. The biggest upside: No Don King!

We Say: We're already talking so much smack around the office that they'd better get us this game before real fisticuffs break out.



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Madden 99

By Tiburon Studios for EA Sports
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: After last year's flawed Madden, EA gave the PC version to the developer who did the PlayStation version. Good move. Graphically, it's the best Madden ever, with polygonal players of three different sizes (linemen are big, QBs are smaller), three times the number of animations (the receiver's head tracks the ball as it flies into his hands), better situational and positional sounds, a revamped multiplayer interface, and on and on.

While the series has always had its cleats firmly rooted in action, there's now a fairly robust sim component. Franchise mode lets you run a team for 15 years, drafting players, negotiating contracts, signing free agents. And did we mention they added a play editor?
We Say: If EA continues down this road, they could dominate the PC football market the way they did on the Genesis.

NFL GameDay '99

By 989 Studios
Due: September 1998
What's New: Head-to-head TCP/IP play—we're talking action gameplay, not just coaching. 989 Studios will have a Battle.net-type matching service for this PlayStation stalwart's PC debut, which features excellent motion-captured D3D and Glide graphics.
We Say: What was that we were saying about Madden?

Links LS '99

By Access Software
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: As if it were possible, Access upgrades the graphics of its first-rate Links LS series and adds on a bunch of new courses and play modes to bring Links buffs an overhauled game. We're less enthused about the mouse-swing addition, which seems tacked-on, but it's optional.
We Say: Links LS is the best golf-game around, from graphics to gameplay. Any upgrade almost seems like a bonus.

Golf Pro 99

By Empire Interactive
Due: October 1999
What's New: Dead serious about challenging the big boys in golf's ultracompetitive PC market, Empire turned out a very promising debut with The Golf Pro. This upgrade promises an even lusher graphical dimension and further improvements to its already impressive mouse-swing system.
We Say: We said last year that this series just needed another good year to catch Access. Golf Pro 99 just might.

Ultimate Soccer Manager 98

By Sierra Sports
Due: Summer 1998
What's New: The "beautiful game" gets the sim treatment as you steer your club through player acquisition, contract negotiation, and team strategy, all the way to the pitch. A genre that sells like hotcakes in Europe, Ultimate Soccer Manager 98 is an example of how to do an off-field sports-sim right.
We Say: You don't need fancy graphics when you've got addictive gameplay.

NHL 99

By EA Sports
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Even more realistic motion-captures (love the one-handed stick handling) will heighten the NHL experience with this year's update. The polygonal players are hauntingly lifelike during play and between whistles. Former Colorado coach Marc Crawford is back as AI consultant, and in a reach for the mass market, EA's adding a beginner's-mode tutorial to coach people on hockey and gameplay basics.
We Say: If EA says they can make this year's release even better than last year's, we'll just have to believe them.

Motocross Madness

By Microsoft
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Its graphics are eye-popping, its physics are a blast, and the multiplayer tag game is a wheeled hide-and-go-seek that should never get old.

We Say: Vroom—give us the Freestyle Pro and some dunes, and let's ride.

NASCAR Racing 3

By Sierra Sports
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Fans of this exceedingly involving racing series can look forward to improved graphics and a new and more challenging physics engine. The 3D-acceleration age ensures that Papyrus' creation will look like a million bucks.
We Say: Most other racing games pale in comparison to NASCAR 2, and we expect NASCAR 3 to set new standards.

Deer Hunter 2

By GT Interactive
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The original had a lot of industry execs staring at sales charts in disbelief. But what's the mystery? It hit a mainstream vein of interest and was expertly distributed by GT. The sequel adds new settings and improvements to the original's rudimentary shooting model.
We Say: Say what you like, but Deer Hunter is a phenomenon that brought a lot of new people to gaming. The sequel will only bring more.

SIMULATION

So what the heck is a sim, anyway? Our broad definition has had to grow even more as developers hit upon some intriguing new ideas for games that put you in the driver's seat, whether of a tank, plane, starfighter, or metropolis. Developers are tearing into their sims with a single-minded zeal that's resulting in some classic games, and this year's upcoming crop looks to set new standards in each of the subgenres.

HOMEWORLD

By Relic Entertainment for Sierra Studios
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: Visually, Homeworld is in a class by itself—a 3D space-combat sim that puts you in command of incredibly immersive stellar battles.

A prime example of how genre-bending can lead to brilliant new ideas, Homeworld will mix standard space-sim play with a real-time combat model that involves you in a rapidly changing mass-scale action. Part Wing Commander and part Starcraft, a solid strategic element will keep the flyboys honest while requisite twitch skills will make new demands on Joe Q. General.

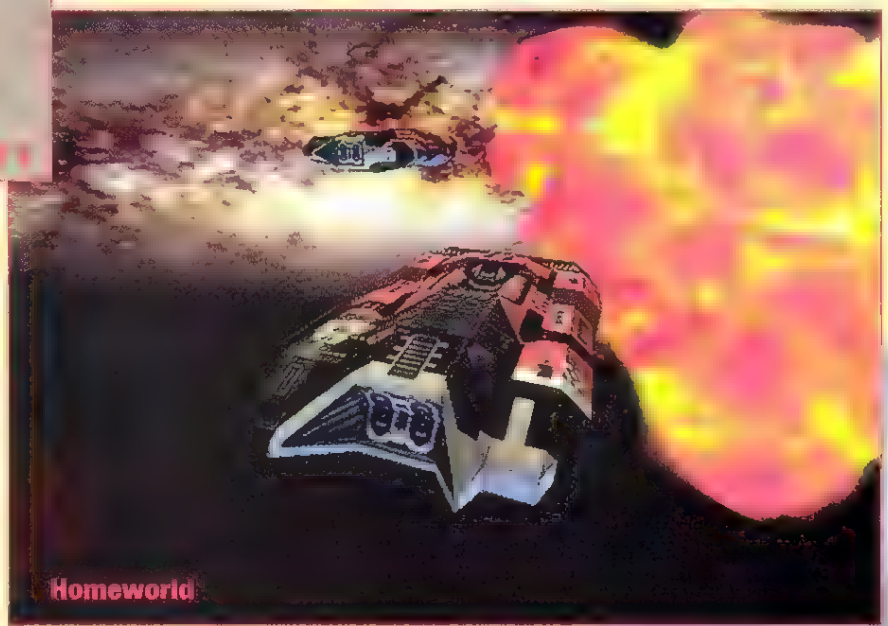
You'll set up a plan of attack and then direct the battle's execution, with the added dimension of taking up the fight at your own fingertips. It's as strong a concept for a sim as we've seen in a long time, and its visuals are world-class.
We Say: If Homeworld lives up to its splashy E^3 preview, we're all going to be losing a lot of sleep.

Apache Havoc

By Empire Interactive
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: A modern chopper-sim that combines the thrills of piloting the AH-64D and the Russian MiL-28 Havoc. The terrain graphics and helicopter art are fantastic, and this looks early on to be a potential Longbow 2–killer.
We Say: The best of two military worlds.

Fighter Squadron: Screamin' Demons Over Europe

By Activision
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: We've been waiting for it since before last year's E^3, but Screamin' Demons finally seems near completion. It's a good thing, too, because flight-sim fans are going to go nuts over the game's incredibly realistic physics/damage model. Pilots will find out just how it feels to fly over authentic modeled terrain in a dogfight as bits of their craft are being shot off. This should give a super-



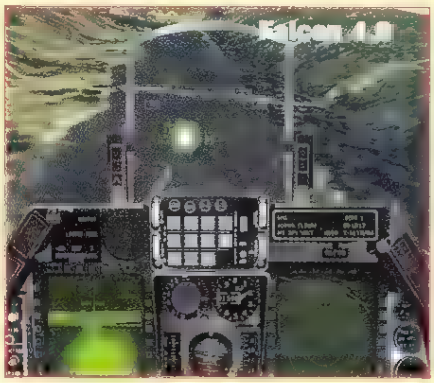
charged boost to historical accuracy in World War II air-combat games.
We Say: It could be the only combat-flight sim you'll need all year.

Populous: The Second Coming

By Electronic Arts
Due: Winter 1999
What's New: An entirely refurbished edition of the classic Populous, this update returns you to the godlike position of shaping a fledgling world and its inhabitants. Wonderful tools let you sculpt the terrain and manipulate the society in an attempt to win converts.
We Say: Its pedigree is impeccable, and its darkly humorous edge is welcome.

Falcon 4.0

By MicroProse
Due: Christmas 1998
What's New: The F-16 never got a better simulation than the sterling Falcon 3.0, and this long-awaited update promises to get the bird back in the air in fine style. Our early looks at this game showed off the technical precision, lifelike graphics, and campaigns that will make Falcon 4.0 the game of choice among flight-sims' hardcore fans.
We Say: A grand master lights the fires again. Quit your day job—there's a war on out there.



Need for Speed III: Hot Pursuit

By Electronic Arts
Due: Fall 1998
What's New: The cops are on your tail this time around, and their flashing lights

are on top of a Vette. NFSIII also boasts a totally new physics model that includes assisted steering and braking in arcade mode. Purists can turn off the assists for a more realistic sim mode.

In another new feature, you'll be able to download new cars off the NFSIII Web site, and in multiplay, you can drop tire spikes as you drive the cop cars and ticket your buds.
We Say: The stunning graphics (including reflective surfaces) and new multiplayer wrinkles make this a must-drive.

Coming Next Month

Exclusive! Activision's Dark Side

The new Dark Side engine is powering two of Activision's heavy-hitting sequels: Interstate '82 and Heavy Gear II. *PC Games* gets an exclusive look under the hood at I-82's choppers, motorcycles, indoor fighting, and Vegas locale circa 1982. We also get into gear with HGII's new units and varied environments—including a trip into space.

Exclusive! SiNfully Good Levels

The one and only Levelord, aka Richard Gray, shares his design tips and philosophies as he illustrates how he built SiN's Jungle level.

Previews: Homeworld, Civilization 3000, and Alpha Centauri.

Reviews: Urban Assault, Team Apache, WarGames, Vangers, WarBirds, Incoming, and many, many more.

Tech: A high-res look at the current crop of Voodoo II boards.

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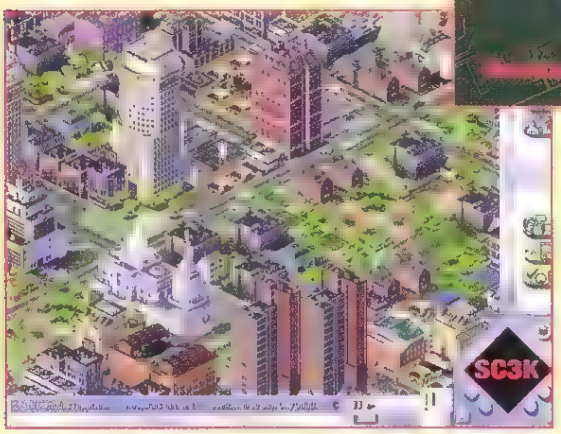
SimCity 3000

By Maxis

Due: Fall 1998

What's New: It's been a long, hard road, but Maxis is finally here (sans Sid) to deliver SimCity 3000. The depth of gameplay ought to be incredible—after all, this is the heir to gaming's premier resource-management legacy. Glorious graphics are a huge plus.

We Say: We got a good laugh out of Ed Koch's endorsement of SimCity 3000, but his involvement won't stop us from digging in deep with this long-anticipated true sequel.



Su-27 Flanker 2.0

By SSI

Due: Christmas 1998

What's New: Its predecessor was known as one of the most difficult and challenging flight sims ever brought to market—and also one of the most rewarding. Version 2.0 will keep the learning curve steep, but that should only have hardcore pilots salivating in anticipation.

We Say: As long as the manual ain't in Russian, we'll be there to tackle this beautiful beast.

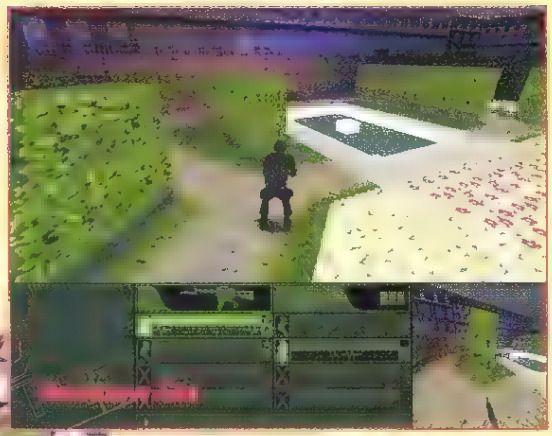
Microsoft Combat Simulator

By Microsoft

Due: Fall 1998

What's New: Flight Simulator with guns!

We Say: About time.



Rainbow Six

By Red Storm Entertainment

Due: Summer 1998

What's New: An intriguing design that weds tactical mission planning with 3D-shooter execution. You command an elite international anti-terrorism unit, and you'll have to learn to rescue hostages and take out bad guys using real-world methods of armed response.

We Say: RS looks leagues ahead of the last Clancy game, Politika. Tac-ops junkies should have a field day with this exhaustively researched sim.

Heavy Gear II

By Activision

Due: Fall 1998

What's New: A totally 3D-only engine and a new visual élan. By dumping the last vestiges of the old Mech 2 engine for a whole new construct, Activision can make this sequel more graphically impressive, while new control features make the gameplay more unique. HGII is still completely Gear-centric, but expect more of an anime feel to the Gear designs.

We Say: Pulling together the cream of the I-76 and Battlezone design crews has its virtues.

RPG

Publishers across the industry are prepping a new wave of first-rate role-playing games with lush graphics, rich worlds, and classic RPG gameplay. For our in-depth look at the hottest RPGs on the horizon, check out this month's EverQuest and RPG features.

ANACHRONOX

By Ion Storm for Eidos

Due: Spring 1999

What's New: Tom Hall takes the Quake II engine into third-person RPG territory. Expect up to 440 NPCs and a *Blade Runner*–style adventure set against the backdrop of a city built upon an abandoned alien colony. The early tech demo we saw—and the game's mission to make a statement and move people—enthralled us.

We Say: Wow, do 24- and 32-bit textures look pretty when you see them though Hitchcock-style moving-camera zooms. Hall's team is one to watch.

Elysium

By Cavedog for GT Interactive

Due: Christmas 1999

What's New: John Cutter of Betrayal at Krondor fame is looking for a new way to tell a story. Rather than using the conventional chapter format, he's going to present the Elysium universe episodically. Each episode is a 5- to 10-hour standalone game, but all of the episodes will play off each other, with common themes and threads running throughout. Think *X-Files* (the show). Lush 3D graphics promise to make your adventures in the World Beyond Dreams beautiful, and you'll get to control up to three (of nine) characters in each episode.

We Say: One of the most interesting concepts we heard at the show, and Cutter can certainly spin a tale. ■

Stunners and Bummers

Every year the PC Gamer editors return from E³ raving about this and moaning about that. Immerse yourself in the industry for three days, see hundreds of games, talk to thousands of people, drink too much and sleep too little, and voilà—your head is overflowing with thoughts, ideas, theories, conclusions on the good and reflections on the bad. Here, then, is a sampling of what we've been saying to anyone who asks, "How was E³?"

George T. Chronis, News & Technology Editor

Stunner: Party on, 3D Realms. I'll admit the Duke Nukem Forever I saw at E³ wasn't exactly the what I saw one of the best, thanks to a change from the Quake II engine to the Unreal engine. But I believe, I'm a sucker for big bosses, big weapons, and big bosoms. What crammed into the new stuff, like easy character/player being able to pick up and use any weapon and interact with any model, and face animations with true lip-synching. Oh, and the amazing built-in mods such as "spread the disease" and a revision on "kill the guy with the ball."

Bummer: That no matter how much I wished, there was no Total Annihilation 2 to see. No work in progress, no sneak-view technology demos, no concept drawings, nada, nothin', good-night sweetie. Even Cavedog promised nothing of the sort, but I was hoping for more than "We'll be ready in 2000—have a look at all of our other cool stuff." I hope, Brad Gilbert and company do have some great stuff on the boards, but I wanted hard proof that TA will live on now that lead designer Chris Taylor has left to start his own show, Gas Powered Games.

Corey Cohen, Managing Editor

Stunner: How truly beautiful the new games look. I'm sure 3D accelerators were in full swing, and many of the upcoming games looked great with a 3D card. This year, everything (or virtually everything) supported 3D cards, and a growing number of games will require hardware acceleration. That means a surprising number of titles looked absolutely stunning. Whether it was Muhammad Ali in Knockout Kings, Need for Speed III's crashes, or the lush worlds of Rayman II, the graphics were marvelous. Few new games would dare forsake colored, dynamic lighting, real shading, and whopping polygon counts.

Bummer: How truly beautiful the new games look. With the obvious focus on phenomenal graphics, there was a scary tendency to highlight them in game promotion. This could become a long-term problem, because while Microsoft's made it easy for developers to incorporate 3D acceleration, those same developers need to realize that great graphics don't equal great gameplay. As the visual playing field is leveled, boredom will become increasingly boring, and more and more fun will need to go into innovative engines, dynamic AI, creative multiplay, and other non-visual elements. Are developers up to the task? We hope so.

Willem Knibbe, Reviews Editor

Stunner: The coolest, most interesting trend is the (near) pollination among genres—and it's about time. Almost every action game now includes adventure or RPG elements, RPGs are getting as graphically rich and action packed as shooters, strategy games are including first-person elements, and so on. This genre convergence could really broaden the industry's reach—and gamers' horizons—as snobby first-person shooter-only types (or RPG types, or sim types) are exposed to gameplay elements from other genres and find they like them. Such upcoming games as Quantic Dream's Omikron, Planet Moon's Giants, and Cavedog's Good & Evil and Amen will serve as good bellwethers for the industry.

Bummer: PC gaming is increasingly becoming a case of the haves and have-nots. I worry that both camps will get fed up—the haves because of the expense of keeping up with the latest and greatest, and the have-nots because there's no game that runs well enough on their current system to draw them in. It's an issue the industry is now grappling with for years, and it looks like it's only going to get worse. With so many companies at E³ announcing that their games will require hardware acceleration and/or a Pentium II 200 with 64MB of RAM, the gap between the technophiles and tech-impoverished is widening.

Danny Lam, Assistant Editor

Stunner: Fun as a bunch. Not always a Duke Nukem, the developers I met seemed to get into genuine shoot-and-run gory mayhem style (the kind we went right between the railings, way cool). Sacnoth's Cyborg Joystick and Cyborg Pad—custom-fitted and solid in my hands, I'm gonna want two of each. Ubi Soft's Sonic, a racing/shoot-the-other-cars game more satisfying than just running the other guy. Psygnosis' Pandemonium, a very realistic look into how the building demolition. Creative Labs' PCI sound card/Cambridge SoundWorks package—I'm getting closer to replacing your home theater every day.

Bummer: I kept looking for some kind of revolution at E³—something that really stood out—kinda like when graphics accelerators first arrived. Instead, it seems we're heading into more of an evolutionary stage, and what I saw was a mad rush for developers to do a "me, too" thing: D3D and 3Dfx support, force feedback, "cleaner" interfaces, and knock-offs of successful titles. Please, anyone, Deer Hunter?

Daniel Morris, Editor at Large

Stunner: The sound squad down at many games publishers at Wan Chai's Sun Plaza, Jagged Alliance 2, the whole new wave of games, their predecessors and turnabouts, are going to give us thousands of small military scenes to download, gun down and blow up. It's a treasure trove for any armchair sergeant.

Bummer: The endless supply of sports games. It seemed that for every NHL 99 there were five more obscure titles that missed the sports day, administrative procedure. Computer sound [illegible] before jumping on the big-league bandwagon.

Making the *PC Games* A-List is the ultimate honor. If it appears here, the game's not just good, it *rocks*. For the complete rundown of every title that's aced its exam, visit **www.pcgames.com/alist.**

THIS MONTH

Name	Section	Publisher
Unreal	Game of the Month	GT Interactive
Descent: Freespace	Fly & Drive	Interplay
X-COM: Interceptor	Fly & Drive	MicroProse
Independence War	Simulation	Infogrames
HardBall 6	Sports	Accolade
World Cup 98	Game Shorts	Electronic Arts
Warhammer: Dark Omen	Game Shorts	Electronic Arts
Addiction Pinball	Game Shorts	MicroProse
Strat-O-Matic 3.0	Game Shorts	Strat-O-Matic Game Co.
Comanche Gold	End Game	NovaLogic
Dungeon Keeper Gold	End Game	Electronic Arts

PREVIOUSLY

Name	Issue Reviewed	Publisher
Battlezone	(July/Aug '98)	Activision
Of Light and Darkness	(July/Aug '98)	Interplay
Sanitarium	(July/Aug '98)	ASC Games
F-15	(July/Aug '98)	Electronic Arts
Might and Magic VI	(July/Aug '98)	3DO
M1 Tank Platoon II	(July/Aug '98)	MicroProse
TA: Core Contingency	(July/Aug '98)	GT Interactive
Race Pack	(July/Aug '98)	Virgin Interactive

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING

The sun's out! But with summer comes a bunch of games that are making us throw in the beach towel and hole up inside.

1. Unreal →
2. Descent: Freespace
3. Final Fantasy VII
4. The X-Files Game
5. World Cup 98

HOW WE RATE GAMES

Here at *PC Games* we use a letter-grade system to rate games. Everyone knows what our grades mean without needing an in-depth explanation or clever chart, an A+ is the best score possible and an F is a complete bust. To give you a better feel for the overall quality of a title, we rate each game in six key areas. We also select a Game of the Month for each issue. We review games when and only when the makers say they're ready for review.

GAME of the MONTH: The *PC Games* Game of the Month is the one title among the month's releases that stands out from the rest. While it's generally the best overall game of the month, a game will occasionally warrant this honor not because it's the highest-rated game in the issue, but because it's a standout in one or more areas.

GAMEPLAY: In a nutshell, how much fun is it to play? This takes into account the quality of the game's interface and control scheme, and is weighted more heavily than other ratings in the overall grade.

GETTING STARTED: How much reading, studying, and hardware-tweaking are required before you can start to have fun? (The less the better.)

GRAPHICS: How advanced and attractive are the game's visual elements, and how well do they serve the game? If a game's 3D-accelerated graphics are significantly different than its standard look, we offer separate grades.

MULTIPLAYER: How much value will you get from the game's multiplayer element, if there is one? (N/A = not available) This rating takes into account ease of multiplayer setup.

SOUND CHECK: How good are the game's sounds and musical score, and how well do they serve the game?

OVERALL GRADE: All in all, how strongly do we recommend the game for purchase?

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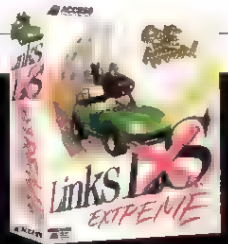

COMING FALL '98!

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Jagged Alliance 2

Those temperamental mercs are back

By Barry Brenesal

Body parts strewn haphazardly across the tropical landscape, mercenaries screaming at one another in incendiary hate—call me sentimental, but I still enjoy the original Jagged Alliance. So it was with more than polite interest that I recently dug into an alpha of Jagged Alliance 2.

The game is set in the nation of Arulco. You play the head of a small mercenary firm hired by Enrico Chivaldori, the former Arulcoan head of state, to return him to power. The current dictator, ruling with an iron fist, is Chivaldori's cunning wife, Queen Deidranna.

The setup part is handled through a clever mock-laptop interface that lets you view email (containing mission offers and evaluations), study your financial statement, and view your firm's history. You can also link to various Web sites: AIM to purchase the temporary services of experienced commandos with a variety of skills and quirks; MERC for "bargain-basement" commandos; and IMP, whose novice soldiers-of-fortune disguise a humorously designed front-end to JA2's character-generation manager. There's also an online weapons store and an insurance firm.

Once you and your forces hit the ground running, you'll quickly discover just how large, attractive, and diversified that ground is. There are 220-plus territorial sectors of 256-by-256 squares. Your mercs will discover airports, cliffs, ruins, swamps, and 13 cities that must be converted to Chivaldori's cause. Watch the passage of day and night in 16-bit SVGA. Thrill to the sounds of mercs complaining, screaming, and ratting on one another. Their interactions are largely influenced by their personality and a new morale system. If you're winning the battle, they'll get along better and follow your orders. If you're losing, they'll carp at each other and be more likely to question you.

The action doesn't stop when the sun goes down.

One of JA's stronger elements was its nonlinear gameplay, and that's been supplemented in JA2. Rather than lose a scenario when night falls as in JA, you can play through the night—just keep an eye on the clock and make sure your mercs get some rest.

You'll find various recruitable NPCs while liberating Arulco, and they won't always be in the same locales each time you play, either. Your squad-leader's leadership factor will determine how swiftly NPCs convert to your side. Winning the confidence of locals is essential to reconquering Arulco, but many mercs have the interpersonal skills of an angered skunk.

Some commandos have additional talents and drawbacks, like martial arts—yes, there'll be hand-to-hand combat—claustrophobia, a fear of insects, and a talent for night operations.

The Queen's randomly patrolling enemy-air squadrons are equally complex. They may parachute attack-forces down to your location, perform tactical air-strikes, or radio headquarters to bring massive reinforcements by road.

During the turn-based or real-time combat, you'll undertake up to 20 quests, battle for gem mines to fund your endeavors, guard supply lines, and eliminate, sector by sector, the Queen's forces.

From what I've seen so far, JA2 looks to be a more than worthy sequel.

What's New in JA2

- An isometric perspective with 16-bit graphics and dynamic lighting
- Night missions
- New movement options for the 50-plus unique mercs, including running, crawling, jumping, and climbing
- More than 20 NPCs
- New weapons: sniper rifles, burst-firing automatic weapons, throwing-knives, armor-piercing bullets, fists
- Supply lines that must be maintained
- Driveable vehicles, including a Humvee to transport mercs from sector to sector
- New merc attributes: morale, leadership, strength
- The ability to create your own mercs, complete with customizable voices

JAGGED ALLIANCE 2

Publisher:	Sirtech Software
Web:	www.sir-tech.com
Available:	October 1998

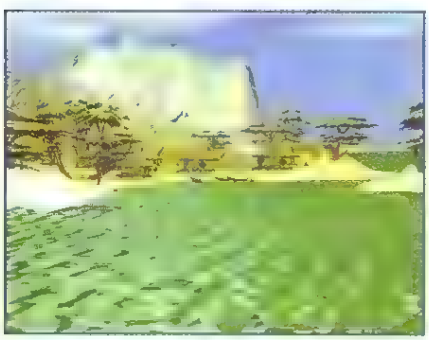
The Lionhead Diaries, Part III

We've zoomed ahead a few entries as Lionhead director Steve Jackson chronicles getting the newly named Black & White ready for E³

It wasn't until the Electronic Entertainment Expo that I finally got my first real glimpse of Black & White, the game we'd all been working on for the last nine months. During that period I'd often thrown my hands in the air in exasperation. "But where is this game, then?" I wanted to know. "No one can show me anything! What does everyone do all day?" Their response was always one of mild amusement, as if pacifying a petulant child. Everything was going fine, they'd assure me.

The all-night coding sessions before E³ had finally produced something even I could appreciate. Admittedly this was only the Black & White testbed—a working version created just to try out gameplay. But many of the main features were there. The landscapes, tribes, spells, and titanic creatures were all coming to life (see the Black & White preview, next page).

How had all this stuff come about? I asked Senior Programmer Jonty Barnes to enlighten me. The first job was to plan out the organizational scheme for the project, things like the basic class structure of programs and files, naming conventions, the way the map would be stored. Once that was settled, the programming team—just four people at the time—could begin on libraries and tools.

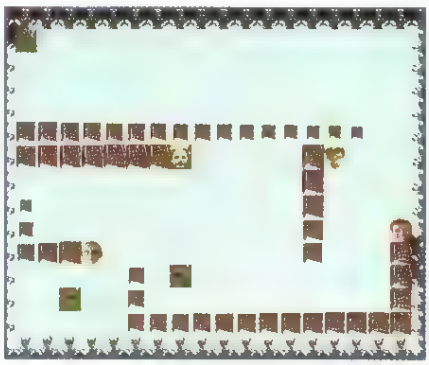


This Egyptian village is an example of how Black & White will look.

The libraries are the essential little utility files that hide the underlying machine from the pure game code. The tools are utility programs that stitch the bewildering array of graphics files into a format the game engine can read. An example of a tool is the Sprite Editor, used to line up the animation frames. Jonty's first job was to get it started.

Thinking and moving

Our systems specialist, Tim Rance, began by planning out the networking routines. These were developed and tested with a game of Snakes that Tim wrote especially for this purpose.



Tim Rance's networking-routines test. The little snake faces are, from left to right, Peter Molyneux, Mark Webley, Tim, and Steve Jackson.

Mark Webley worked on the creature AI. From the test routines, he had to make educated guesses at exactly what would be required later in the game. Some things—like deciding where the creature was going or whether or not it was hungry—were straightforward. Deciding how it would save memories of "learned" experiences would not be so easy.

Meanwhile, Jonty proceeded to work on the movement model: how things would move across—not through or under—the landscape, how they would speed up going downhill and slow down going uphill. He also developed the navigation program—the AI routines that direct a villager or creature to get from A to B naturally and efficiently.

As the number of these programming routines expanded, they began to spin off a massive list of graphics that would be required from the artists. Every creature, building, person, tree—everything—would have to be drawn up individually.

Testbed graphics

For the testbed, some images were created as simple bitmap graphics. As sprites, these 2D images could be animated in the traditional cartoon-cel way. Replacing one sprite with another, frame by frame, gives the illusion of movement.

However, the artists can also create objects in 3D. For this, Mark Healey and Jamie Durrant use 3D Studio Max. Here, everything is made up of polygons. The number of polygons an artist will use depends on how realistic they want the object to be, and how fast the game needs to be able to move through 3D space. As your viewpoint moves around, the computer continually recalculates the perspective, adjusts the relative size and position of each of the polygons appropriately, and then redraws the object. The greater the number of polygons that have to be resized, the more the processor is clogged up with graphics calculations (3D accelerators take on many of these chores).

Once a wireframe object has been created in polygons, it's a fairly simple process to color (each polygon is allocated a color or texture) and animate them. Because the object has been created in 3D, it can automatically be viewed from any angle.

At the time of E³, B&W was perhaps halfway through its development. 143,000 lines of code had been written already. The master list of graphics had run to over 16,000 pictures to be drawn. If this sounds like a lot of work, then you'll understand why it can take a team of 15 programmers and artists two years to create one game.

NEXT MONTH:

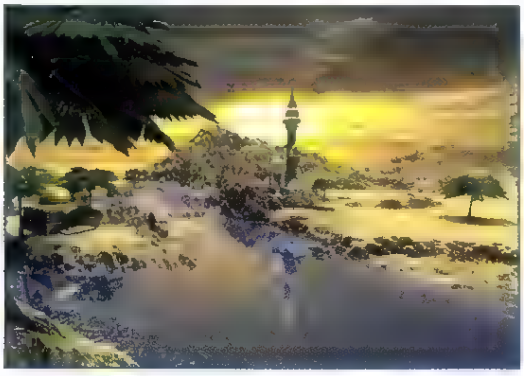
Back to the diary's proper order as Lionhead copes with a virus, expands the team, and shapes Black & White.

Black & White

Peter Molyneux's new game is his most ambitious to date—and could change the way we play

By Willem Knibbe

Peter Molyneux feels he has to prove himself all over again. Tiring of corporate pressures, he sold Bullfrog to EA about a year ago, then founded Lionhead Studios.



Black & White will feature stunning hi-res graphics.

His games—Populous, Dungeon Keeper, Theme Park, Syndicate, Magic Carpet—have sold about 10 million copies worldwide, and here he was back at square one. "We had nothing, nothing," he says. "No programs, no computers to run programs on, nothing."

If you've been following the Lionhead Diaries (see previous page), you know that the England-based studio now has *something*—a staff, an office, computers, and the start of what Molyneux calls the most important game of his career.

"The world's an Eden at the beginning. It's idyllic. There's no conflict, no strife," he says. He launches the testbed version of B&W and points out the villagers, of which there'll be 5,000, each with their own AI routines. They're going about their daily business of tending cattle, fishing, even courting. There's trading between villages. Everyone coexists peacefully.

"It's truly a utopian society," Molyneux says. "Then *you* come in."

You are a sorcerer wielding ultimately powerful magic. At game's start, one of the nine villages is loyal to you. You can interrupt its normal routines and bring villagers to your citadel to worship you. The more villagers chanting your praises, the more magic you acquire, and the more powerful it becomes. If you convince the Egyptian village to worship you, you'll get Egyptian-type magic. A Celtic village will grant Celtic magic, and so on.

Casting spells in the interfaceless game (no icons, just your godly hand cursor) relies on "gesture recognition." Move the mouse in a circular motion and you'll cast a circle of fire. A long, quick sweep sends a wall of fire rolling over the landscape. You'll have to practice to cast spells quickly and effectively.

Then there's your "creature." Pick any living thing out of the world and deposit it in your citadel's "training pen." Like a child, it begins growing and learning. You mold its personality by training it.

If you want it to eat rival villagers, you stick one of them in the pen and pat your creature—"cuddle him," as Molyneux says—after he feasts. When your creature picks up one of your villagers and starts chomping, a good swift bop will teach him that they are off-limits.

Your creature keeps learning, growing, and morphing, assuming physical characteristics that reflect his personality—and yours. (Lionhead's plans even call for a massively multiplayer world where you can export your village, stick it into a gargantuan land, and see what new skills your creature learns.)

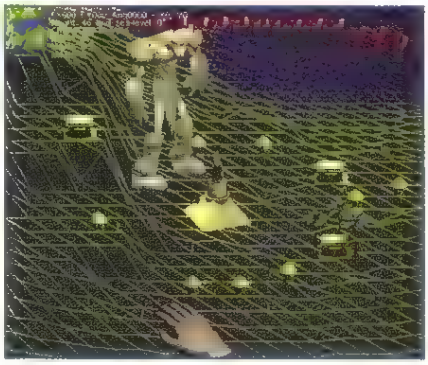
"Black & White is a huge personality test," Molyneux says. "It looks at everything you're doing and determines whether your actions are good or evil. Your goodness or evilness is then reflected in the game, graphically and in the AI."

For instance, if you're a sorcerer prone to casting healing and protective spells, your citadel begins looking Disneyesque. If you toss fireballs about willy-nilly, it'll look like the ominous castle in *Dark Crystal*.

Of course, you're not alone. Other sorcerers are casting spells, training creatures, and being worshipped. The goal is to control all nine villages, so conflict will arise.

You might notice ominous clouds gathering on the horizon and realize a lightning spell has been cast against your village. You'll have time to get your villagers frantically worshipping at your citadel so you can cast and maintain a protective spell. If you've exhausted them already by relying on them too much, your creature can cast a defensive spell it learned from you.

B&W's fascinating blend of genres combines population management, real-time strategy, twitch skills, and, for lack of a better term, parenting skills. The concept that a game will bow to your conventions, learn from you, and reflect your psyche makes it one personality test we can't wait to take.



The testbed version. Molyneux creates a playable version of a game first and worries about the graphics later.

Follow Black & White's progress every month in PC Games' *Lionhead Diaries, director Steve Jackson's chronicles of life at a game studio.*

BLACK & WHITE

Developer:	Lionhead Studios
Publisher:	Electronic Arts
Web:	www.lionhead.co.uk
Available:	Late 1999

Unreal

It finally is

By Steve Klett

I've become a little fed up with id Software's domination of the first-person shooter market. Other than perhaps Duke Nukem 3D and Jedi Knight, there haven't been many titles that are even in the same league as both Quakes—and none could compete with id's technical savvy. Enter (finally) Epic MegaGames and Digital Extremes' much-hyped, much-anticipated, and oft-slipped Unreal.

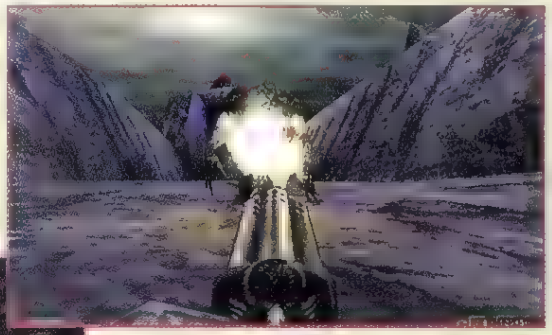
It offers a better single-player experience than Quake or Quake II and is powered by one helluva serious 3D engine. Unreal is hands-down the most unique-looking shooter to come along in an extremely long time—if not ever. The environments are vast, varied, lush, and breathtaking. The textures are much larger and more detailed, colorful, and varied than those in Quake II, resulting in a much more interesting exploratory experience as you delve through the variety of levels—from dark, dank caves to huge outdoor settings with kaleidoscopes of bright colors.

The special effects this engine can produce are truly amazing. Water cascades and ripples; lights blend, pulsate, and shimmer realistically. And the reflective surfaces of some of the floors are jaw-dropping. Sure, it's more of a "see what we can do" feature rather than one crucial to Unreal's level design, but it looks pretty. There's also per-pixel fogging in software and 3D acceleration that really lends itself to the atmosphere pervading most of the game. You'll encounter this in the first level as you explore some foggy air-ducts, a game opening that really sets the mood.

The 3D sound-effects are also amazing, particularly if you have an A3D-licensed card. The sounds of monsters' footsteps, engine hums, water dripping, waterfalls, bird cries, and gunshots change dramatically according to your position relative to them. On some of the more cavernous levels, you'll find that sounds echo convincingly. The electronic music, however, pretty much sucks—I recommend you turn it off or throw in your own CD.

Why am I spouting off about Unreal's technical merits before getting into its gameplay? Because Unreal's technology is its most noteworthy element. When you get to the gameplay, Unreal is essentially of the same old find-your-way-to-the-next-level variety—it's just a much more beautiful journey.

You're cast as a prisoner aboard a prison-transport ship that crashes on a mysterious planet. You awaken amid the ship's rubble bruised, battered, and confused. Your first task is to find some medical attention, then find a way out of the ship, and eventually find a way off the planet.



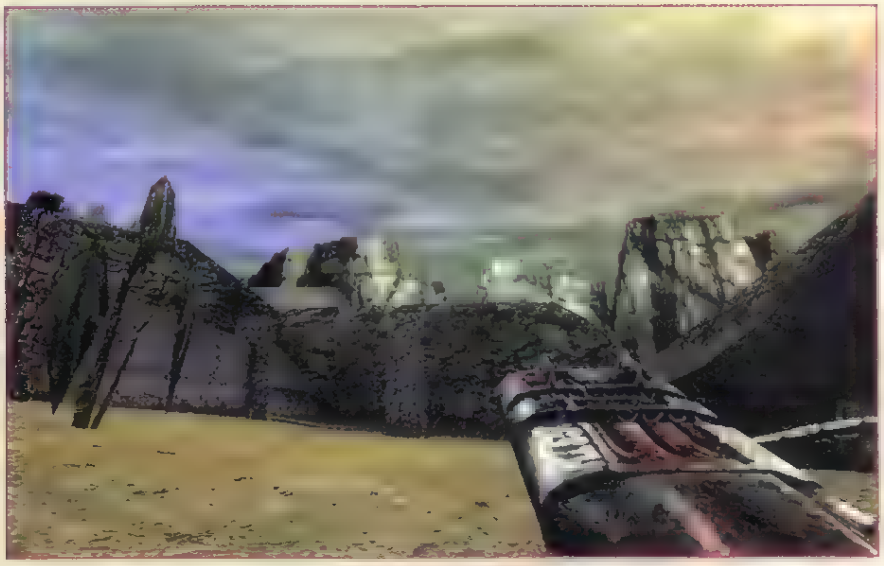
Engage the Titan from a distance whenever possible.

With up to 800 polygons and 300 frames of animation, Unreal's monsters are the most detailed ever seen.

It seems other ships have crashed on this planet as well, and a race of aliens known as the Skaarj have taken it upon themselves to reign supreme. Together with a host of alien baddies, the Skaarj are up to something—which includes the subjugation of the planet's native residents, the Nali.

As you progress, you'll spend most of your time roaming through spaceships and Nali gothic temples and villages. During your journeys, you'll discover more information about the Skaarj and what they're doing, the planet you're on, and the Nali via your handy-dandy Universal Translator (never leave home without one).

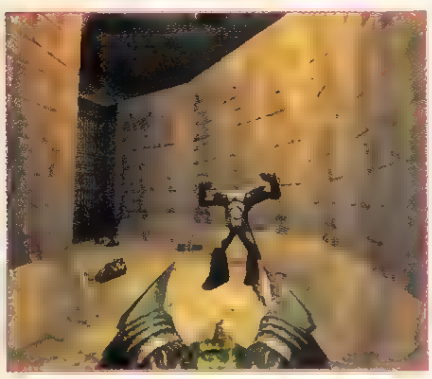
You'll also find various weapons—10 in all—with which to combat the Skaarj and their minions. Each weapon has a secondary-fire feature that's usually more powerful than the primary firing method but takes more time or ammo. For example, the primary-fire trigger



Unreal knows outdoors.

on the 8-Ball Launcher fires standard rockets—up to six at a time depending on how long you hold the trigger. Its secondary-fire option launches grenades. Your standard weapon is the Dispersion pistol, and there are five power-ups that make it substantially more deadly.

The weapons are fairly well balanced and interesting in single-play, but Unreal's monsters are even better. Where Quake II tries to overwhelm you with numbers, Unreal tries to overwhelm you with quality—there are fewer enemies, but they're more detailed and tougher to kill. There's been much hype around Steven Polge coding the AI (he created the Quake Reaper Bot), and the team claimed that fighting them would be like fighting human players. Well, not quite. But the Skaarj (and variants)



The Razor Jack takes their heads off.

do duck, strafe, roll, dodge, flank, and fire better than any enemy AI seen before in a shooter. They also patrol levels rather than staying put in the same spot. The Skaarj and their variants are by far the most interesting. The rest don't pose much of a challenge—not even the massive Titan, who is awe-inspiring but not that difficult to defeat.

Unreal doesn't redefine the genre, but it does have a look and atmosphere all its own, resulting in a compelling single-player experience. And it definitely has its great moments, like the tense one in Dark Arena when four doors slightly obscured by fog start opening. Emerging from behind one is a gargantuan Titan, slamming the ground to send you flying, then hurling massive boulders at you. A few levels later, the Skaarj drop down from the Terran ship's ceiling vents in numbers, intensifying that "me alone vs. the aliens" feeling. Other moments are equally impressive but more subtle: emerging from a claustrophobic hallway into an expansive, gorgeous Nali world with birds flying overhead and rabbits hopping around; the mooing of the Nali "cows"; the transporter portals on the Skaarj mothership.

Better story exposition and development (the ending was incredibly cliché and the game's final confrontation lame), more scripted events, and more unique things to do would have elevated the game into truly unreal status.

So would more attention to multiplay. Games run smoothly on a LAN, but not over the Internet. Few servers were up at the time of this writing, and playing on them was a lagfest of shameful proportions. Hopefully this'll be improved in coming months via patches. It must, or Unreal will remain an also-ran in the world of online gaming.

The weapons are also serious underachievers in multiplay—it seems to take forever to kill your target. In addition to standard deathmatch multiplayer support, you get teamplay, King of the Hill, and co-op play, and there's the option to play with and against bots—and they're pretty challenging. If it weren't for these customizable bots (which can be included in deathmatches), Unreal would be a complete bust in the multiplayer department.

Another boon: the game includes an unsupported beta version of the Unreal Level Editor (a full, retail version will be sold separately). This is by far the easiest 3D-level design tool I've encountered, once you patch to get it running. No doubt it'll spawn a healthy online community—provided Epic can iron out the game's Internet bugs.

Unreal's biggest hurdle by far is its meaty system requirements—this game had my P200 MMX machine with 64MB of RAM and a Canopus 6MB Voodoo accelerator gasping for breath like no other shooter before. Dropping to 512-by-380 res (the max for a 4MB Voodoo

Dead again.

card) and low-detail textures helped, but it still didn't play completely smoothly.

If your PC has the muscle, you'll get a lot of enjoyment out of Unreal. It isn't the Second Coming, but it's pretty damn good.

UNREAL

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	A
GRAPHICS:	A
MULTIPLAYER:	B-
SOUND CHECK:	A

A- OVERALL

It's hard to live up to such Epic hype, but Unreal comes close.

DEVELOPER	Epic MegaGames, Digital Extremes
PUBLISHER	GT Interactive 800 972-7434
WEB	www.unreal.com
REQUIRED	P166, 16MB RAM, 100MB HD, CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	PII 200, 32MB RAM, 450MB HD, 3Dfx card, A3D card
STREET PRICE	$50

TIPS ▼ Do not dance with the Skaarj. Your best tactic is to lure them into a confined space such as a long hallway so they can't dodge effectively, then let 'em have it. Better yet, sneak up on them from afar and nail 'em with a well-aimed rocket or sniper shot. ▼ If you have to get close, the GPSBioR file is surprisingly effective—just watch where you step! ▼ Stealth is your best friend. You don't have to kill every creature you see.

Forsaken

Descent gets a challenger

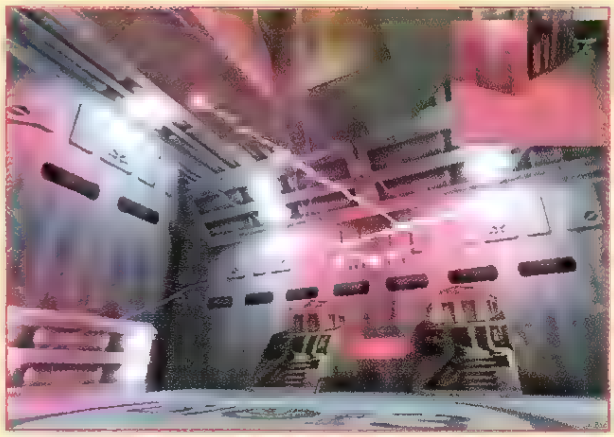
By Jason D'Aprile

Acclaim's vision of the future may be Forsaken, but it sure looks good. Besides being the current poster child for 3D cards, this is pure, unadulterated, mindless action in the Descent school. There's virtually no storyline, but its near-constant, nail-biting action in a multitude of claustrophobic environments—all wrapped around a parade of eye candy—makes Forsaken a formidable successor to Interplay's classic corridor shooter.

Forsaken's physics are bouncier than Descent's—you don't really crash into things so much as hit them and bounce back, which can be annoying. And most of the hoverbikes you fly around in look rather ridiculous. There are 16 to choose from, their riders all foul criminals simply looking for loot to pillage and things to kill on the broken husk of a destroyed Earth—and there's your plot.

While the odd bike-shapes don't matter at all in single-play, they cause some real problems in multiplay—mainly because opponents often look too small and resemble power-ups, despite options to make them more visible. And even though Forsaken boasts an impressive 25 weapons total, the main ones are rather boring—plasma bolts, a flamethrower, laser beams. Aside from the reflecting Transpulse and a variety of missiles and mines, there's nothing particularly new or innovative in the game's armaments.

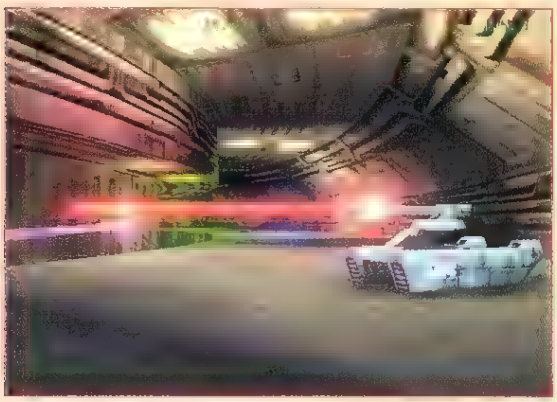
Forsaken does an excellent job of balancing solid single-play with well-implemented multiplayer support. The 15 single-player levels are entertaining and well designed overall, but they have a couple of glaring problems. The game relies very heavily on its impressive visuals—an especially noticeable flaw when entering large rooms with incredible lighting but little else happening. And Forsaken is absolutely spawn- and ambush-happy. Almost any time you find a secret area or grab a power-up, more enemies suddenly appear behind you—not a sign of creative level design. As a result, the game is often nightmarishly difficult on normal settings and occasionally even on easy.



Sure, it's pretty, but not so good for your health.

Thankfully, there are incredibly cool traps and puzzles, such as radioactive or sweltering hot zones, timed runs through lightning fields, and other deviously entertaining obstacles. Enemy AI is surprisingly good, and each robot type has a set level of awareness that you can use to your advantage. In later levels, robots strafe and duck behind obstacles to avoid your fire, and some follow you.

Multiplayer options are quite extensive, supporting up to 16 over a LAN or TCP/IP (though I wouldn't recommend more than four on the Internet), with 13 multiplayer arenas, team games, deathmatches, CTF, even a treasure hunt. Internet stability was very good, with a variety of options for tweaking lag issues. The game's available on Mplayer, and there's also a patch on the way to let people set up dedicated Forsaken servers.



Always look before plowing forward: you never know who might greet you.

Overall, Forsaken's visuals are brilliant, with some especially stunning lighting effects, though textures often look flat. It also runs commendably well unaccelerated. Of course, you'll need Direct3D for the full effect. The music wavers between inspired and standard hard-rock/techno fluff; and the sound effects are well done, with some nicely subtle bike sounds. Playability is true six degrees of freedom, as in Descent, and can be very complex. While the control-configuration options are thorough, the game annoyingly divides the weapons and movement settings into two menus.

Forsaken is far from perfect, but it's still an incredibly entertaining mix of Descent II and Quake II; the visuals alone are bound to keep you glued for some time. Combining great graphics with highly difficult, engaging single-play and great multiplayer support, Forsaken is a top-flight action game.

FORSAKEN

GAMEPLAY:	B+
GETTING STARTED:	B+
GRAPHICS:	B+
3D ACCELERATED:	A
MULTIPLAYER:	B+
SOUND CHECK:	B+

B+ OVERALL

Little depth but plenty of explosive punch.

DEVELOPER:	Probe
PUBLISHER:	Acclaim 800 656 5443
WEB:	www.forsaken.com
REQUIRES:	P133 with 3D card/P166 without, 16MB RAM, 70MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P200 w/ 3D card, 32MB RAM
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS

- Set up your controls so you can easily strafe and move simultaneously
- Search high and low for secret goodies, especially the blue crystals. Nab them all and you get a surprise
- The toughest opponents are generally the other riders—they can strafe and avoid your shots with far greater ease than most of the robots. Whenever possible, try to use obstacles to avoid their fire

Spec Ops

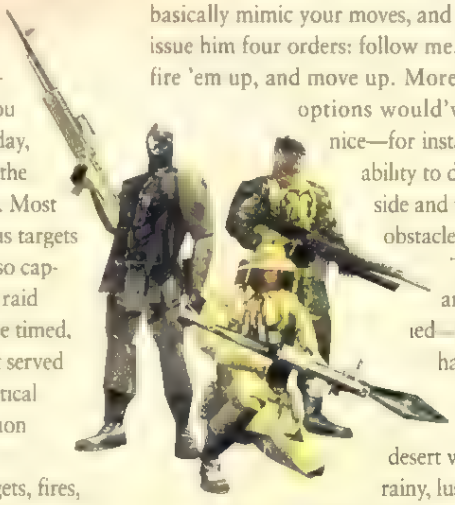
Where's the spit and polish?

By Steve Klett

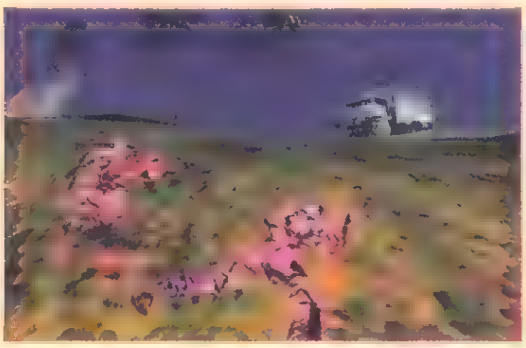
Take a Quake-type game engine, base it outdoors, switch to the third-person, dress up the Quake dude in authentic US Army Ranger garb, and that's what Spec Ops looks like.

Now, slow down the gameplay—picture yourself advancing in a crouch for 10 yards, going prone, and then surveying your surroundings real careful-like. What's that silhouette over there, just beyond that tree? Pull out the 4x sniper scope and carbine. Yup, it's an enemy guerrilla (not the furry kind) waiting to ambush you. X marks the spot...squeeze the trigger...obstacle removed. Get up, move 10 yards, repeat process.

Now you've got a good idea of how Spec Ops plays. And I really got into it—for a while. You have to be careful, methodical, and ultra-efficient with everything you do as you embark on a series of 16 present-day, progressively difficult missions as the leader of a two-man Ranger team. Most missions involve taking out various targets with satchel charges, but you'll also capture prisoners, secure targets, and raid assorted bases. All the missions are timed, which was a bummer for me, as it served to work against the measured, tactical pace. (Zombie may make this option selectable via future patches.)



Lighting effects of burning targets, fires, and various authentic weapons (shotguns, grenades, sniper rifles, satchel grenades, and claymores) are excellent. Your weapons will affect the environment—trees will fall down if they're near exploding satchels, for example—but not everything's destructible.



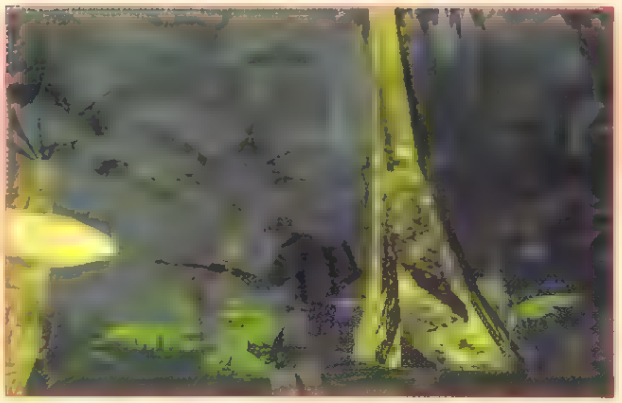
Do you have the patience to pull off an ambush?

You control your Ranger entirely with the keyboard—there's no mouse, gamepad, or joystick support. (Though the recently released v. 1.2 patch addresses this somewhat. But there's that "patch" word again.) You can easily switch between Rangers with a key-press and make them lie down, crouch, run, cautiously advance, and switch weapons on the fly. If you don't switch to the second Ranger, he'll basically mimic your moves, and you can issue him four orders: follow me, hold up, fire 'em up, and move up. More control options would've been nice—for instance, the ability to dive to the side and jump over obstacles.

The environs are nicely varied—from snowy, harsh winter landscapes to arid desert wastes. The rainy, lush, *Platoon*-esque jungle levels are simply amazing. Zombie's game engine doesn't appear as sophisticated as Quake's, but it pulls off the wide-open outdoor style aptly.

Unfortunately, Spec Ops suffers from a variety of technical glitches—most notably, it has clipping problems, where parts of your Rangers disappear and become lost in objects. Your Ranger sidekick also suffers from some severe pathfinding problems, and you'll need to switch to him occasionally just to tell him how to go around a crate—d'oh!

But where Zombie really drops the ball is by failing to include multiplayer support of any kind. Imagine a co-op game: taking on another two-man team, setting up claymore ambushes for them in the jungle while they try to capture or destroy a target of yours... That's just too big an opportunity for Spec Ops to have passed up.



Always carry a shotgun in the jungle...

Zombie has plans to expand the Spec Ops line—an add-on pack is slated for October, and a sequel is also in the works. I'm glad to see the series continue; it's just too bad the team didn't put the spit and polish into Spec Ops first, as the demand for subsequent products likely would've skyrocketed. Spec Ops has loads of potential, but it feels more like a recon than a full-fledged assault on the action genre.

SPEC OPS

GAMEPLAY:	D
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	C-
3D ACCELERATED:	B
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	B

D+ OVERALL

Tons of potential, too many rough edges.

DEVELOPER	Zombie
PUBLISHER	Ripcord Games 888-797-5867
WEB	www.ripcordgames.com
PLATFORM:	Win 95 CD
REQUIRES:	P166, 16MB RAM, 60MB HD, 8x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P200, 32MB RAM, 3Dfx card
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS

▼ Patience is a virtue. Advance in short spurts with one Ranger covering the other ▼ It seems you can never be too far away from an exploding satchel charge—always set them at 15 seconds and run like hell ▼ For patches that address the Ctrl-F9 bug and add 3Dfx textures, support for Voodoo II SLI mode, as well as mouse and (beta) joystick support, head to Ripcord's Web site

Redneck Rampage Rides Again

Dead engine

Frankly, I felt it was already too late for the Build engine when the original Redneck Rampage appeared last year—even though Xatrix's bountiful sense of lowbrow humor saved the game. But to get a message in 1998 telling me to ditch Win 95 in favor of DOS for Redneck Rampage Rides Again is just wrong.

The sequel picks up with Rampage's dynamic duo crash-landing back on Earth in the Southwest and hoofing their way home through Texas to Arkansas. The 14 levels are new—and some are even gloriously funny, like Jack-O-Lope Farms. But the gameplay is as tired as

a decaying armadillo carcass on I-35, even though I loved shooting the homing-chicken crossbow.

Redneck Rampage is sadly outdated in a world full of Quake II–and Unreal-based shooters—even if it does let you ride a Harley and a swamp buggy Shadow Warrior–style.

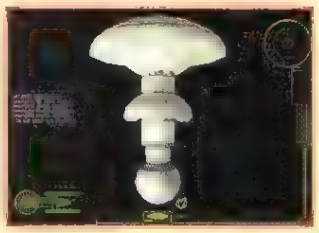
—George T. Chronis

Developer	Xatrix
Publisher	Interplay
	800-468-3775
Web	www.interplay.com
Street Price	$50

C- OVERALL

Starfleet Academy: Chekov's Lost Missions

An add-on? Why?



You thought you'd graduated, right? Of course not. It seems every game these days has extra missions or mods to keep the income flowing, and Starfleet Academy's no exception. Chekov's Lost Missions adds seven new single-player missions and throws in two new multiplayer capabilities.

The missions are very similar to those in Starfleet. Chekov and Sulu appear again, the difficulty is close to the original's, and even the mission objectives seem identical. (Example: launch probe into quasar, fight off unexpected attack while doing so.) In all, these missions could've easily shipped with the first game.

The new multiplayer modules are a little more fun: Capture the Flag takes on a bit more resonance when you're playing with a fleet in space, while Mo' Profit adds a privateer perspective to the Net Profit economic-sim module. There's still no Internet play, however. These days, that's a big strike.

—Don St. John

Publisher:	Interplay
	800-468-3775
Web	www.interplay.com
Street Price	$20

C OVERALL

Flesh Feast

I no longer fear the headless

A tribute to classic zombie horror-movies such as *Night of the Living Dead*, Flesh Feast takes place on the singularly unfortunate Nasat Island, where the dead have clawed their way out of their graves in search of that tastiest of rare delicacies—human brains.

Get cornered by a group of zombies and you'll be joining them.

Players control characters from a floating-camera POV, looking down on office buildings, hospitals, a mall, an airport, and—of course—a graveyard. Commanding the small and rapidly decreasing number of hapless humans, it's your unlucky lot to scramble around collecting up to 50 weapons, locate anybody who hasn't yet been "invited to dinner," and get the hell off the island.

The game's dripping in gore—dismemberment by chain saw (with appropriate shifts in sound effects as it goes through surface flesh to bone and back out again), cranial supernovas courtesy of Winchester, cinematic brain-consumption scenes, and body parts littering the blood-soaked battlegrounds.

Flesh Feast is neither a great game nor a terrible one, but it does have a few problems. Sketchy "mission" briefings and the absence of a comprehensive tutorial make your immediate strategic goals a bit nebulous. Also, the control scheme's a little sensitive, making a simple thing like running through a zombie-infested airport slightly more challenging than it should be.

In many ways, FF's zombie-play is most rewarding. You don't get all the nifty gadgetry, but the enemy doesn't get to eat you, you get to eat him—chowing down on the poor sap like the fast-food meal that he is, absorbing the McVictim's attributes for later use. Players can have their friends for lunch on HEAT.net; and if you're a teamplay-type, Flesh Feast's cooperative mode lets you jump in on your friends' side and give them a hand...or an arm...or a leg...

—Chris Hudak

FLESH FEAST

Gameplay:	B-
Getting Started:	C
Graphics:	B
Multiplayer:	B
Sound Check:	B

B- OVERALL

Like a B-movie, but with more gore and zombies.

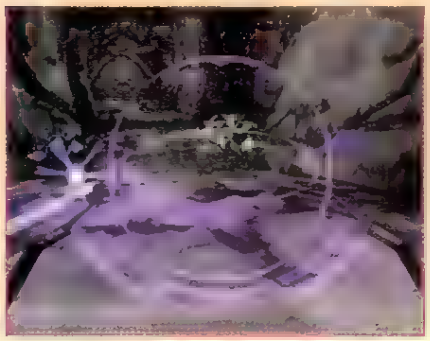
Publisher:	SegaSoft
	888-734-2725
Web	www.segasoft.com
Requires	P133, 16MB RAM, 4x CD ROM drive
Recommended	P200, 32MB RAM, D3D card, 8x CD ROM drive
Street Price	$50

Shadow Master

By Jason D'Aprile

Wannabe Quake on wheels

Shadow Master harkens back to the days when Psygnosis was king of the beautiful, surreal fantasy-action game, dominated by its graphically stunning Shadow of the Beast series (which did things that PC games still don't do). With the aid of world-renowned artist Rodney Matthews' not-inconsiderable talents (check out a few of your old Thin Lizzy or Asia album covers), Shadow Master's science-fantasy is very cool. It's especially a nice change of pace from most first-person shooters. But sadly, the play mechanics leave much to be desired.

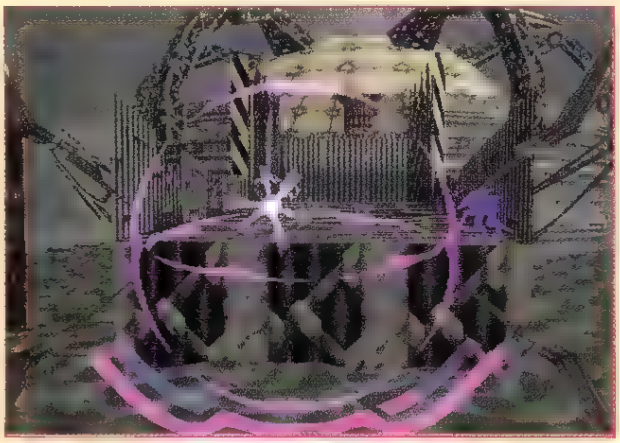


It's a blue-light special.

In a new twist on the shooter genre, you're placed in an armed-to-the-teeth, six-wheeled buggy vehicle. It's kind of a Quake-meets–Big Red Racing sort of thing; and, at least when it's rolling forward, your vehicle handles about how you'd think such a thing would—a big part of the problem here.

The levels themselves are as fully populated as any hardcore shooter, but your buggy's handling makes the fighting terribly unwieldy. It has a nasty habit of getting stuck on all sorts of obstacles (particularly the ever-puzzling invisible sort). To top it off, you can't run things over. There are numerous control options, ranging from keyboard to control pads to joysticks and even steering wheels, but it's clearly designed with a pad in mind. At least Psygnosis has finally had the foresight to add network multiplay for up to eight players, with four types of deathmatches. Still, there's no Internet support.

Clearly, the reason to play Shadow Master is for its visuals. The levels have a crisp, slick, impressive style to them, and level design is decent, if very linear. All the monsters look as if they were grown from crystals, an idea substantiated by the way they blow up into glassy shards when destroyed. There are seven "worlds" in the game (16 levels total), including quaintly violent forests, Arctic realms, a spacecraft, and a sea world. All of them are a wonder to just drive through. There's a bit too much in the way of 2D elements throughout, though, and the lighting effects are noticeably less complex than those in Quake II or Psygnosis' own G Police. And don't even bother trying to play the game without a good 3D card (it supports D3D): the unaccelerated game was unplayable in both low and high resolutions on a P200 MMX.



When in doubt, destroy.

Obnoxiously, Shadow Master will only let you save when you're progressing to a new world, not after each level. Given the game's difficulty, this leads to a lot of unwanted replay. The sound effects, on the other hand, are very well done, and audio cues help keep you aware of what's around the next corner. The music mixes nicely atmospheric tunes with a sort of Revenge of the '80s metal-grind montage—and not an especially good one at that.

Yummy—octopus tonight!

Shadow Master's biggest flaw is that it doesn't even attempt to be something more than a mindless shooter. Monster AI is virtually nonexistent, the levels rely far too much on overwhelming numbers of monsters and sudden ambushes, and all you really do here is shoot switches and kill the bad things with uncomplicated and unoriginal weapons. The game's fun for what it is, but it can be highly frustrating—and it's not even close to what it could have been.

SHADOW MASTER

GAMEPLAY:	C+
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	C+
3D ACCELERATED:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	B-
SOUND CHECK:	B

C OVERALL

Visually impressive, shallow, mindless shooter.

DEVELOPER	Hammerhead
PUBLISHER	Psygnosis 800-438-7794
WEB	www.psygnosis.com
PLATFORM	Win 95 CD
REQUIRES	P166, 16MB RAM, 50MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P200, 4MB 3Dfx card
STREET PRICE	$50

TIPS ▼ Be quick about getting the power-ups from destroyed foes. They d sappear a most as quickly as they form ▼ Ambushes are everywhere—especially at points where you must backtrack to reach another part of the eve ▼ As in classic s de-scrol ers, most of the bosses have specific patterns for defeat, though some you merely bang on til they d e

Black Dahlia

Black magic and Nazi noir

By Daniel Morris

In 1941 Europe, the Nazi regime, inspired by occult mysticism, has plunged the world into war and chaos. In Cleveland, the first modern American serial-killer is dispatching his victims with aplomb. And in Los Angeles, a doomed young actress named Elizabeth Short suffers a gruesome demise in an unsolved case that will be forever remembered as the Black Dahlia murder.

These three real-life events have been spun into a fictional web by the designers of Black Dahlia, an ambitious adventure-game mixing full-motion video with an immersive first-person graphics engine.

With a budget in the millions, Take 2 Interactive's Black Dahlia is a noirish cross between *L.A. Confidential* and *The X-Files*, incorporating tried-and-true elements of both hard-boiled period detective-stories and supernatural thrillers.

Follow the Nazi conspiracy into the heart of a forbidding secret crypt.

You play Jim Pearson, a young and untried agent in the new Office of the Coordinator of Information (COI). The COI has been created as a counter-intelligence group whose mission is to keep tabs on potential "Fifth Column" traitors in the US. The government fears German Nazis operate a large group of spies and saboteurs, and that this network is why Germany has been able to swiftly establish control over Europe.

Your predecessor, an agent named Walter Pensky, is now in a mental institution because he came to a different conclusion: he believes Nazi success is owed to ritualistic occult magic being wielded at the highest levels of command. Of course, the deeper you dig into the case, the less insane Pensky's theory seems.

Gameplay progresses through a series of beautiful, detailed renderings of over 70 locations in the US and Europe, where you eventually go to chase down the Nazi threat. The quality of the art is fantastic. The lighting effects are incredibly realistic and add immeasurably to the suspension of disbelief—some of the creepy areas practically drip with menace.

There's no shortage of ominous locations as you move from the continental US to spooky Europe.

Black Dahlia is also a prime example of how to marry actors to a composited background. The interplay between the humans and the computer-generated settings is virtually seamless, and at no point is the bluescreen work distracting.

A shame, then, that the actors don't do much worth watching. Darren Eliker is stiff and bland as hero Pearson, the kind of generic cardboard "young guy" that FMV games have been trotting out for years. Dennis Hopper gamely plays the cryptic Pensky from the mental institution in a slightly baffled cameo. The greatest indignity is the casting of Teri Garr as Madame Cassandra, one of the mumbo-jumbo experts Pearson has to consult. As I watched her wade sullenly through her ridiculous scene, I could only repeat, "Say it ain't so, Teri."

Black Dahlia features an immersive and attractive game world, and its writers pack it full of intriguing historical and metaphysical tidbits; but the game ultimately doesn't satisfy because it's stuck in the old, dreary patterns of its less visually compelling forebears. Gameplay doesn't amount to much more than pointing and clicking your way through every desk drawer and file cabinet in the game, interrupted by long video stretches and the occasional aggravating puzzle. The occult element curses you with having to decipher mystic cryptograms in order to advance.

This great graphics engine and top-notch video-compositing technology should be directed at a truly new and energetic story and characters. Black Dahlia's eight discs, 70 locations, and 50 speaking parts just don't add up to a compelling game, though it gets some points for its technological feats.

BLACK DAHLIA

GAMEPLAY:	B-
GETTING STARTED:	C+
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	B

B- OVERALL

Technically impressive, but not enough original gameplay.

DEVELOPER:	Take 2 Interactive
PUBLISHER:	Interplay 800 468 3775
WEB:	www bdahlia com
REQUIRES:	P90, 16MB RAM, 20MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P120
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS ▼ Search Walter Pensky's office to find his notes and the confidential report on Nazi occultism—plus you'll find his loaded .38 revolver ▼ The Cleveland bureau chief, Sullivan, isn't quite the hard-ass he seems. Make friends with him and he'll offer you useful leads ▼ The gentlemen's club isn't all about fun and games, closely analyze the reservation card for Nazi iconography ▼ Don't trust the FBI. (Does anyone?) You'll find they resent the COI and only want to hamper you.

Starship Titanic

Lost in space

By Barry Brenesal

Had he been born 10 years later, I'm convinced Douglas Adams would've been a games designer first, writer second. The creator of *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* thinks like a programmer. He treats everything in his books (including people) as objects trying to solve one bewildering puzzle after another. It's no wonder he authored a couple of text-based graphical adventures years ago for Infocom. Starship Titanic marks Adams' return to the computer-gaming arena, and it's most welcome.

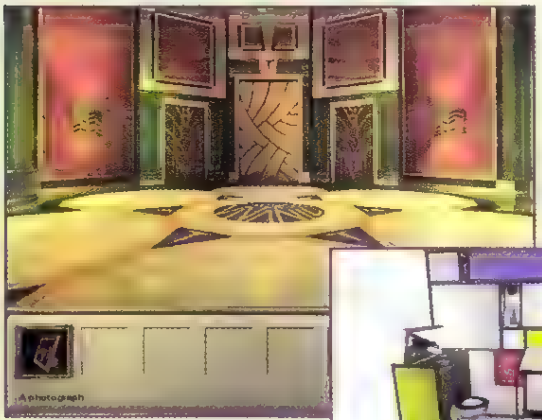
The story is characteristic of Adams. Your house has been wrecked by the crash of the luxury starliner *Titanic* during its maiden voyage. Edmund Fentible, the DoorBot, asks your assistance in setting matters right. He neglects to mention that no one else is aboard except other robots, all of whom are generally unhelpful and somewhat deranged. To make matters worse, he can only assign you a tiny, tacky, third-class cabin in steerage.

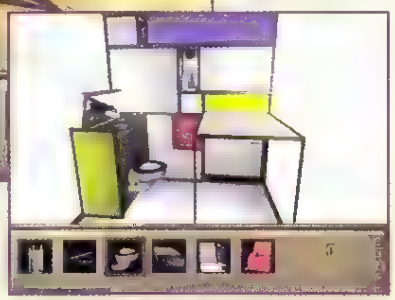
You won't be spending much time there, however. Instead, you'll be roaming through one of the more visually impressive graphics adventures in recent years. Like Riven and Obsidian, Starship Titanic alternates between static, SVGA scenes of 16-bit color and noninteractive animations used to propel you quickly in a given direction. The ship's artwork is memorable for its fusion of 1930s art deco with a subtle pictorial sense of humor. Your minuscule cabin, with its endless number of ugly, retractable, plastic necessities fitted into its walls, looks like a Mondrian painting; and the lobby desk bell doesn't summon a receptionist—it morphs into one.

That brings us to the game's considerable dialogue. It's an unusual feature these days, when a vast amount of CD space is required to store detailed SVGA-animated images. Many graphics adventures have either eliminated human interaction altogether or settled for clever workarounds, like Riven's cinematic snippets. But the *Titanic* features a very garrulous onboard staff. Its workaround is the use of robots instead of humans, which eliminates the need for elaborate facial expression. The robots' animated images are superimposed on stationary shipboard backgrounds.

The DoorBot would like to help, but his memory has slipped since the crash.

Interacting with these characters is one of the highlights in this game, for as Adams fans know, his robots frequently come across as more human and humorous than their flesh-and-blood counterparts. In Titanic you'll meet Marsinta, the hotel receptionist from hell; Krage, the surfer-dude BellBot with a girl in every COM port; and Nobby, the elevator robot who describes his current ailments and former military exploits to a captive audience en route.





The Embarkation Lobby (above). It's a long way to fall from here to your third-class room in steerage (right).

Despite the easygoing humor, this isn't an easy graphics adventure. A few of the puzzles and some object placements are neither intuitive nor logical. For instance, you can't get the perch from the parrot cage because it's in use. But when you grab the parrot out of its cage, the door automatically locks—for no sensible reason, except to provide a puzzle where none fits. Titanic's producer told me that "it's just the Adams Way with frustration, and people either love it or hate it." It may be the Adams Way, but it's also the Lazy Way to build a graphics adventure. Hard puzzles are a pleasure to solve; anti-logical puzzles are just a waste of time.

I still recommend Starship Titanic, though. It's handsome and entertaining, and if you get aggravated occasionally, you can always access the walkthrough at **www.pcgames.com**.

STARSHIP TITANIC

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	A

B+ OVERALL

Some illogical puzzles, but the graphics and humor are great.

PUBLISHER:	Simon & Schuster Interactive 800-223-2336
WEB:	www.starshiptitanic.com
REQUIRES:	P100, 16MB RAM, 100MB HD, 16-bit color, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P133
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS ▼ Listen carefully to whatever you're told, and make notes. The Chat-O-Mat feature of your PET (Personal Electronic Thing) has a limited memory for retaining conversations. ▼ The three meters on the left side of your screen during conversation indicate each robot's personality, memory, and motion settings. Note the resemblance between various robots and the exhibits in the Sculpture Room—and the keys on the sculptures that change these settings. ▼ When you encounter the talking bomb, remember what it says. Nobody likes a smartass. ▼ The solution to the Music Room Puzzle is actually published on the game's box.

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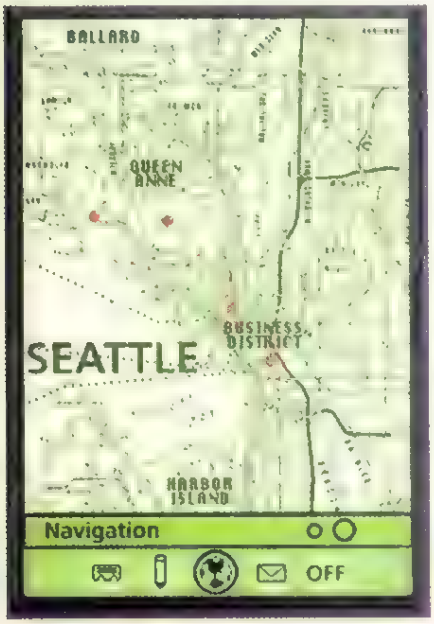
The X-Files Game

The mystery deepens

By Don St. John

The truth is out there...somewhere on seven CD-ROMs. And with no fourth wall, either. Indeed, the point of The X-Files Game is that you get to be the bleak, angst-ridden FBI agent who solves the mystery. That's at once the magnet that draws you in and the thing that might push you away—there's just no way developer Hyperbole Studios could capture the taut, hour-long pace of the weekly series.

Instead, what you get here is a steady adventure game that gives you a feel for the way Fox



As you go through the game, you end up with a lot of turf to cover.

Mulder and Dana Scully might feel if they really existed. Players deal with elusive clues, weird characters, and the FBI bureaucracy, but in a methodical manner. The X-Files Game doesn't remake the gaming landscape in any way; in fact, the interface is pretty run-of-the-mill. You've seen this mix of stitched-together video, multiple-choice dialogue boxes, and characters addressing you face-to-face before.

The game's saving grace is the appearance of most of the regular cast and clutch of supporting characters, the familiarity of the storylines from the show, and how well the cinematic cut-scenes simulate what *X-Files* fans are accustomed to. Of course, Mulder and Scully are both here, but after the opening cut-scene, you have to dig well into the game before they turn up again. (Visit **www.pcgames.com/scully** for a Q&A about the game with Gillian Anderson.) It's Assistant Director Walter Skinner (Mitch Pileggi) who carries much of the action throughout.

You play as Craig Willmore, a clean-cut, square-jawed young agent enlisted by Skinner to help find the missing Mulder and Scully, who've gone AWOL while pursuing a case in Washington state. You'll rely heavily on the standard items of an FBI agent, including a badge, handcuffs, an evidence kit, and a gun—the last of which you're only supposed to use in the gravest situations. Most important to you are your trusty PDA (an Apple Newton, one of many glaring product-placements) and cell phone. The PDA is your pathway to the various game sites on the Web, storage for collected notes and information, and email gateway.

One thing Hyperbole executed well is the mix of difficulty levels. If you want, you can tackle the game without any help whatsoever, which means poring over everything slowly and carefully. For those more interested in moving along the story and getting the general *X-Files* experience, there's the Artificial Intuition icon, a fuzzy blue dot that lights up when you're getting hot on a clue. Wait long enough, and it'll jump you into the next action scene to get you what you need. Fox is clearly targeting an audience that would quit out of a tougher game, and hardcore adventure players aren't going to find anything at the difficulty level of a Riven or Temüjin. But the puzzles aren't contrived, either: the clue trails mirror a typical *X-Files* episode.

The trouble begins.

The interface is a bit standard, but the plot will keep fans hooked.

So does the writing. The game has a good measure of the show's dry humor and sarcasm, and the plotline fits right into the whole *X-Files* structure as if it were a standalone episode. More than anything, the attention to story (from a concept by show creator Chris Carter) is what gives The X-Files Game its authentic feel. So while playwise it's not the last word in adventure games, no true X-Phile should be without it. Trust us.

THE X-FILES GAME

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	A-
GRAPHICS:	B
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	A

B+ OVERALL

Not as satisfying as "Clyde Bruckman," not as weird as José Chung. But fun for true fans.

DEVELOPER:	Hyperbo e Studios
PUBLISHER:	Fox Interactive 888-369-0031
WEB:	www.foxinteractive com
REQUIRES:	P120, 16MB RAM, 250MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P166, 32MB RAM, 8x CD ROM drive
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS ▼ You'll need a password for the ING system on your desktop computer, and it's not hard to find Willmore's a C v l War buff ▼ Shanks, your Special Agent In Charge has a lot of gu dance to offer n tough spots ▼ Check your PDA notes often As you talk to people or take act ons, the important stuff gets logged here—as do some clues on how to proceed

Descent: Freespace

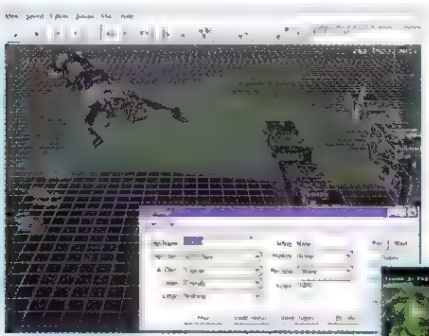
Somebody finally got it right

By Michael E. Ryan

Apart from the name and design team, Descent: Freespace has little to do with the original Descent titles. In fact, Interplay needn't have included the Descent moniker at all. This fantastic space-combat sim earns its own place among elite games.

For starters, Freespace offers a fantastic single-player campaign. As the game opens, you're a rookie pilot with the Galactic Terran Alliance (GTA, the good guys). The GTA is locked in a long-running war with the Vasudans. While these two are busy beating up on each other, a third power, the mysterious Shivans, joins the fray. This new force is so powerful that the GTA and Vasudans must unite in a desperate bid for survival.

Sure, it sounds like Wing Commander: Prophecy, but the campaign unfolds at a splendid pace and really conveys the sense of tension and mystery that the Shivan threat presents. The 29 missions (not including the four training missions) outline a fairly believable (albeit accelerated) military campaign that culminates in a memorable last-ditch effort to halt the Shivans once and for all. It's one final confrontation you won't forget.



Freespace's excellent mission-editor.

Elements of the campaign vary based on your performance. For instance, if you succeed in taking out a cruiser in one mission, it won't be there to cause trouble in the next. Many of the missions will seem familiar to Wing Commander and TIE Fighter fans: patrolling waypoints, inspecting Shivan freighters and capital ships. Most of the others are fairly original, including protecting your carrier on a mad dash through an asteroid field by picking off the asteroids in its path.

Best of all, a sense of urgency lingers throughout as the Shivans brush aside GTA and Vasudan forces at nearly every turn. The enemy AI is quite good, as are the difficulty settings, which should suit novices and aces alike.

The game also includes a phenomenal mission-editor. It's so powerful, complete, and intuitive, it ranks as the most impressive mission/level–editor I've ever seen.

A Shivan hits his afterburners just a second too late.

The graphics are pretty stunning, too, with or without hardware acceleration (though you'll want a well-equipped Pentium II to run the software-only mode on the highest detail settings). With a Voodoo II card installed, the game ran beautifully, with only occasional stuttering during large battles. Particularly impressive is the use of scale: Small ships look and feel small, while space stations and capital ships are absolutely enormous. Never have I felt so insignificant as when a Lucifer-class destroyer came bearing down on me out of subspace.

Multiplayer performance is the one area where Freespace comes up a bit short. Despite impressive features (12 players over LAN or Internet, various deathmatch and team settings), the game just doesn't run very smoothly over a dial-up connection. Even over a 128K ISDN line, I wasn't always able to find a playable game on Parallax Online (Volition's free online-gaming service at **www.parallaxonline.com**). However, Volition appears dedicated to ironing out the multiplayer issues. If it can smooth out the problems with a patch or two, Freespace will be just about perfect.

The graphics are equal to any in the space-sim genre.

Even with its multiplayer issues, this game is easily the best thing going in space-combat sims. The graphics are excellent, the story is solid, and the single-player gameplay is outstanding. The great mission-editor pushes Descent: Freespace to the top of the space-combat heap.

DESCENT: FREESPACE

GAMEPLAY: A
GETTING STARTED: A
GRAPHICS: A-
MULTIPLAYER: C
SOUND CHECK: B+

A- OVERALL

Multiplayer flaws aside, it's the best space-combat action game around.

DEVELOPER:	Volition
PUBLISHER:	Interplay 800-468-3775
WEB:	www.interplay.com
REQUIRES:	P166, 32MB RAM, 210MB HD, 8x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P200, 48MB RAM, 3D card
STREET PRICE:	$50

▼ Don't underestimate the power of the unguided missile. In your first encounters with Shivans, a steady barrage of GTM-2 Fury missiles is the only way you'll penetrate those heavy shields. ▼ If you see one of your wingmen closing in on an enemy fighter, resist the temptation to help out with a missile shot. When the bad guy notices that missile, he'll hit the afterburners and zoom right out of your buddy's sights. ▼ For Internet multiplayer games make sure you have the latest version of Winsock (version 2.2—available from **www.microsoft.com/windows/downloads/bin/W95ws2setup.exe**) loaded. Otherwise, you'll run into a maddening "slow mouse" problem.

X-COM: Interceptor

Inherit the stars

By Marc Dultz

Perhaps it was inevitable that MicroProse would port its highly successful X-COM strategy franchise to the action-oriented space-combat genre. In X-COM: Interceptor, the player commands a heavily armed and equally well-armored X-COM space-station, challenged with safeguarding a crucial region of space from alien invasion.

The intriguing X-COM: Interceptor saga is set 17 years after Terror from the Deep but 17 years before the events foretold in Apocalypse. It's the year 2067, and with Earth on the verge of total collapse, the Extraterrestrial Combat Unit (X-COM) has been recommissioned and refinanced. It now stands like a silent sentinel over a mineral-rich sector known as The Frontier. Players command a small but well-trained military contingent tasked not only with thwarting the alien incursion, but also with carrying the war effort back to the enemy's doorstep.

Starting out with a rather rudimentary space-station, several primitive spacecraft, and a small but hearty band of pilots, you carefully expand your power base by recruiting new pilots, making improvements to their base and ships, and erecting new stations. You also download technology and other information from headquarters, all the while keeping abreast of developments back on Earth. The downloaded data is then used to build new equipment, which you apportion to outfit your squadron with the latest gear and weaponry.

Meanwhile, you continually monitor the overall strategic and tactical situation, protecting mining colonies from alien attack, escorting cargo-laden freighters, destroying or launching probes, and generally laying waste to enemy strong points throughout the system. Squadrons must be dispatched to deal with enemy sightings, eliminating the aliens at every opportunity. Failure to protect the area from attacks results not only in a reprimand from headquarters but the curtailment of military funding from the beleaguered mining colonies.

On a tactical level, you act in concert with your fellow pilots, engaging the enemy one-on-one from the confines of a spacecraft. Twisting and turning in the cold void, you'll grapple with the enemy onslaught as best you can—launching missiles, firing lasers, and, when possible, capturing the enemy and its technology.

The powerful space-combat engine doesn't seem to bog down during multiple dogfights.

In a sense, Interceptor's sleek interface is a throwback, employing retro imagery and other *Buck Rogers*–like touches in a stylized, yet effective, manner. The resource-management and technological-research aspects are equally well handled, seamlessly blending the familiar "thinking man" game elements that course through every X-COM product. As a result, logistics and proactive military preparedness are stressed as much as space combat, emphasizing the need for players to continually plan ahead even when the action slows.

Beneath its 3D veneer lies a sophisticated research-and-resource management system

It's a wonderfully balanced and engaging package with space-combat at its heart—and that's where Interceptor truly shines. The full-featured Combat Simulator only hints at the intense free-for-alls and massive battles portrayed in the campaign. And, although there are no freestanding missions to speak of, the single-player mode is deeply immersive and satisfying, relating an engrossing story heightened only by the furious combat sequences.

Interceptor's multiplayer mode (LAN, modem, serial, TCP/IP, Internet Gaming Zone) eschews management and strategic monitoring in favor of full-fledged dogfights.

While traditional X-COM fans may not be ready to pick up a joystick and jump into the action, this is a worthy addition to X-COM lore. Technologically and creatively, Interceptor is a masterful achievement, breathing 3D life into an already absorbing game universe.

X-COM: INTERCEPTOR

GAMEPLAY:
GETTING STARTED: B+
GRAPHICS: B+
3D ACCELERATED:
MULTIPLAYER:
SOUND CHECK:

A- OVERALL

The X-COM universe expands—and the result is magic.

MicroProse
800 879 7529
www microprose com
P133 w/ D3D card, P166 w/out, 85MB HD, 16MB RAM, 2MB SVGA, 4x CD ROM drive, joystick
P200, D3D, 32MB RAM, 265MB HD, 8x CD ROM drive
$50

▼ During the fighter-deployment phase take control of the fighter flown by the lowest-ranking pilot and let the computer handle the more experienced pilots ▼ Instead of hiring an expensive escort for your cargo laden freighters have two fighters patrol the region near your base ready to provide support in case of ambush

F1 Racing Simulation

Beauty powers this beast

I hate to admit it, but I'm having trouble telling all these F1 sims apart. In the last two years, MicroProse, Microsoft, Papyrus (twice), Psygnosis, Eidos, EA, and God knows who else have tried their hands at it—usually with similar (and respectable) results. Now Ubi Soft has added to the traffic jam with F1 Racing Simulation. That bland title and the genre's recent me-too history didn't lead me to expect anything new, so I was pleasantly surprised to discover that this picturesque racer was damnably hard to keep in the garage.

Wipeout! Notice the nice tire-smoke.

The nuts and bolts are typical. You play as one of 22 drivers on 11 teams drawn from real life, racing on an international circuit of 16 tracks—driving either solo, with a friend in split-screen mode (a fine idea), or with friends on linked machines or a network.

Usually, I came in 22nd (and a distant 22nd, at that). The handling seems real: even in "easy" mode you'll lose control of these immensely powerful cars on curves and find yourself at the wrong end of a 300kph conga line.

So what new features does F1 bring to the table? This isn't a genre-defining game. It doesn't have the big, brawny feel of Andretti Racing or the depth of Grand Prix II or the bewildering speed of Power F1. But there's nothing generic about F1's sumptuous roadside detail—hence I find myself remembering not so much the general racing experience as what happened in particular spots. F1 also supports 3Dfx out of the box and offers up vibrant colors and realistic effects like lens flare and smoke from spinning tires, without the smeary marbled textures that mar so many 3Dfx-accelerated games.

Right now, I'm not confusing F1 with *anything*. —*Peter Olafson*

F1 RACING SIMULATION

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	B+
SOUND CHECK:	B

B+ OVERALL

Not quite champion, but it places well.

PUBLISHER	Ubi Soft 800-967-0863
WEB:	www.ubisoft.com
REQUIRES	P120, 16MB RAM, 67MB HD, 3Dfx card or D3D, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P166, 20MB RAM
STREET PRICE:	$45

Motorhead

Racing in a disco

If Motorhead, Fox Interactive's first racing game, had been released a couple of years ago, we'd all be lauding its 3D graphics and forgiving its flaws. Nowadays, it's just a second-tier arcade racer.

You start out with two vaguely futuristic tracks (eventually working up to six) and nine cars. Choose your ride carefully—while the cars all look similar, they have different top-speed, acceleration, and grip characteristics, and it doesn't do any good to hit 300 mph when the track has more curves than Pamela Lee.

Boxy cars, lots of lights. Is this the future of driving?

Go for a single race, league racing, or make your friends suck rubber smoke in the easily set-up multiplay (up to eight players on a network, Internet, or modem match). The Ghost Mode lets you race against a phantom version of yourself running your best time.

With a name like Motorhead, you'd expect to get to tweak your cars a lot. Not so—just hop in, floor it, look out for the other racers, and check out the pretty graphics. Every street light has a lens flare, and there's plenty of colored lighting to go around.

I do have a few gripes. Fox didn't license real cars, so you don't get the thrill of driving a Lambo or Porsche. It's also way too easy to peel out, and the crowd in the stands is unbelievably fake (think flat diorama). At press time there was also a problem with AMD and Cyrix chips in conjunction with Voodoo II cards. Seems that if you have this combo, you'll have to choose the Direct3D rather than the Glide support or you'll crash faster than you can say "Carmageddon."

Flaws aside, Motorhead's an approachable, racing-lite game; but it's a far cry from Need for Speed II: SE's polish.

—*Danny W. Lam*

MOTORHEAD

GAMEPLAY:	B-
GETTING STARTED:	B+
GRAPHICS:	C
3D ACCELERATED:	B+
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	B-

C+ OVERALL

Needs real cars and fewer lens flares.

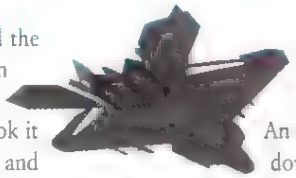
DEVELOPER	Digital Illusions
PUBLISHER	Fox Interactive 888 369 0031
WEB:	www.foxinteractive.com
REQUIRES	P90, 16MB RAM, 100MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P200, 24MB RAM, 3D card
STREET PRICE:	$50

iF-22 Persian Gulf v. 5.0

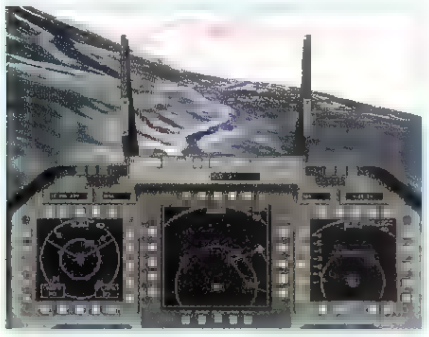
Slightly different game, new bugs

By Andy Mahood

When I reviewed the original iF-22 in *PC Games*' December 1997 issue, I took it to task for its lack of finish and playability. I-Magic's much ballyhooed DEMON terrain-mapping engine—which combines satellite imagery with real-world elevation data to create authentic landscapes—caused most of the problems. Constant disk-access pauses when loading the huge terrain files resulted in a frame rate so jerky that it was almost impossible to enjoy the simulation's otherwise excellent features. I-Magic has since released three separate patches and a Persian Gulf expansion disc that have done very little to fix the problem.



Version 5.0 repairs most of the major problems, most noticeably in the terrain files. Thanks to some enhanced data-compression, the loading pauses that crippled the original are all but gone. The new version also vastly improves the scenery at low altitude, smoothing terrain that was a chunky mess in the old game. Unfortunately, there's now a ludicrous "no fly zone" that makes your plane come to a complete *stop* in midair. While instruments still read as you're moving, you have to turn around and head back in to terrain-file space to pick up speed!



The low-altitude graphics have been greatly improved.

I-Magic has stuck with Direct3D to achieve 5.0's improved accelerated visuals. Translucent smoke and missile trails now replace the ugly "toothpaste tube" weapon shots, and ground-based targets and installations blend better into the surrounding countryside. (It's a shame they didn't fix the shoddy-looking sun and graduated skyline while they were at it.) An unfortunate downside is that game performance may be closely tied to the video card involved. I experienced flickering screens and regular lockups on my PII 300 with both an AGP 3D Rage Pro and a PCI Rendition based accelerator. Switching to a Diamond Monster 3Dfx card eliminated the flickering, but the lockups didn't go away until I switched off some of the graphic detail. Tech support couldn't re-create the problem with the same setup, but this was my experience.

Big, messy explosions come complete with flying debris.

The core gaming experience offered in iF-22 has always been very solid. Boasting above-average flight modeling and excellent avionics, the sim also has one of the best dynamic-campaign engines on the market, with three full offensives to choose from: unlimited single missions (also dynamic), an Instant Action mode, and a full training module. Multiplayer options have been massaged to include eight-player LAN and Net games (head-to-head, cooperative, and Capture the Flag) as well as two-player serial/modem play. The wingman AI has been stepped up so they're no longer a liability to your missions, and additional MFD screens and padlock views—Free Look, Bogey, and Incoming Missile—have been added. With the exception of some garbled and unintelligible radio transmissions, the game's sound is also quite immersive.

I-Magic has successfully repaired or Band-Aided most of the original's numerous problems, but unfortunately, the game picked up some new faults serious enough to cause some concern. Regular lockups with three popular video cards is not something that gives me a warm, fuzzy feeling. But hey—it's not as though I-Magic hasn't had experience patching these kinds of things. They have an entertaining sim here waiting for one last wheel chock to be removed.

iF-22 PERSIAN GULF V. 5.0

GAMEPLAY:	
GETTING STARTED:	
GRAPHICS: 3D ACCELERATED:	
MULTIPLAYER:	
SOUND CHECK:	

B- OVERALL

Despite some misfires, I-Magic's troubled sim is finally airborne.

	Interactive Magic 800-789-1534
Web	www.imagcgames.com
Requires	P133, 16MB RAM, 130MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
	P200, 32MB RAM, 200MB HD, 3D card, 8x CD-ROM drive
	$40 ($20 rebate for iF-22 owners; $9.99 upgrade for Persian Gulf Campaign owners)

▼ Until you develop proficiency, you can select the Reduced RCS option to make your plane all but invisible to enemy radar. I-Magic recommends against this because it's much less challenging than the default setting, but hey—it *is* more realistic. And if the Air Force spent that much money on the technology, who are we to let it go to waste? ▼ If you encounter regular lockups, switch the resolution down to 640-by-480 and turn off a couple of the eye-candy features (e.g., clouds, gradient sky). This completely eliminated the problem on my test system. ▼ You'll need to perform a full install of all the terrain files to take advantage of the leaner terrain-loading function and eliminate disk-access pauses. The animation files can be left on the CD to save hard-drive space.

Monster Truck Madness 2

Cavorting goodness

By Jason D'Aprile

Dipping into the drink slows you down. Notice the cool lens-flare?

Go on, admit it: A lot of you laughed, made hick jokes, and questioned the sanity of the developers when you first heard that Microsoft was making a Monster Truck racing game for its burgeoning games division. Then Monster Truck Madness came out, and it was a memorable, if light-hearted, racing game, much in the vein of Big Red Racing (and where, oh where, is the sequel to that one?!?). Other than being a helluva lot of fun, MTM was important in several other ways—it was one of the first Direct3D games, and its use of DirectPlay enabled TCP/IP play in Windows 95. Both features significantly enhanced our gaming lives.

Now comes the inevitable sequel, once more done up right by Terminal Reality (before they left to find God, er...g.o.d.).

A tranquil romp through a winter wonderland? Sure, why not...

To say the game's impressive would be an understatement. Rivaling anything in the arcades—if the arcades even have a Monster Truck game—MTM2 is as much a thoroughly playable game and fun ride as it is a 3D graphics showcase. Slick, smooth, and just generally great-looking, it runs the gamut for impressive visual effects—translucent water, a variety of weather effects, tread marks, reflective surfaces, crash damage, and, of course, lens flare. Even the sound effects are impressively Monster Truck–ish, although both the repetitive, thumping rock soundtrack and the commentary from Army Armstrong, "Voice of Monster Truck Racing," grated on my nerves enough that I turned them both off after about the third race.

An even more deflating nail in these Monster tires prevents MTM2 from being quite as great as it could've been: it focuses far more on multiplay than single-play. There's no championship mode, so you can only race a single track at a time, and the AI in both the Novice and Intermediate difficulty levels is virtually no challenge whatsoever. Professional mode proved very demanding, but mainly due to less-forgiving handling. There are three special King of the Hill tracks (Summit Rumbles), but there's no option to practice in them with AI trucks. All very annoying.

In addition to the Rumbles, there are 11 racetracks, including some from the original game. They all look great and include plenty of shortcuts to decrease your time. Some of these new tracks include a trip around a Mayan ruin, through a graveyard, over mountains, through the woods, and even (usually if you screw up) underwater. While realism isn't a prime concern here, MTM2 features fantastic obstacle and driving physics. In Pro mode (and even in Intermediate, to some extent), you get a commendably realistic ride.

Multiplayer racing over the Internet was incredibly stable in games of up to four players, and it supports up to eight over TCP/IP, the Internet Gaming Zone, LAN, and serial/modem. But to play the game at all, you'll need some decent hardware. On a P200 MMX with a 12MB Voodoo II, the game ran glass-smooth with all visual and audio options cranked to full. In software mode, MTM2 was a frame-rate nightmare—making it, like most new games, almost require a 3D accelerator.

There's no denying that MTM2 is loads of fun, especially over the Net. For fans of the original or of oversized tires, this is a must-have, even if the game loses a notch overall because of its limited single-player mode.

MONSTER TRUCK MADNESS 2

GAMEPLAY: A-
GETTING STARTED:
GRAPHICS:
3D ACCELERATED:
MULTIPLAYER:
SOUND CHECK:

B+ OVERALL

A rollicking romp through Monster Truck fantasies.

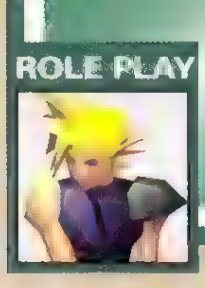
Developer	Terminal Reality
Publisher	Microsoft 800 426 9400
Web:	www.microsoft.com
Requires:	P133, 16MB RAM, 30MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
Recommended	P200 with 3Dfx card, 32MB RAM, 110MB HD
Street Price:	$50

TIPS

▼ Modify your truck for greater speed and better handling—especially when playing on the Net—by sliding the speed/accelerat on adjustment to about 3/4 speed ▼ Learn the track shortcuts for some outrageous cuts in your lap time Knowing them is a must if the players you're racing use them ▼ Weather conditions greatly affect your truck's handling, so play around with the tire selections to find the right rubber for the job

Final Fantasy VII

A fantasy fulfilled

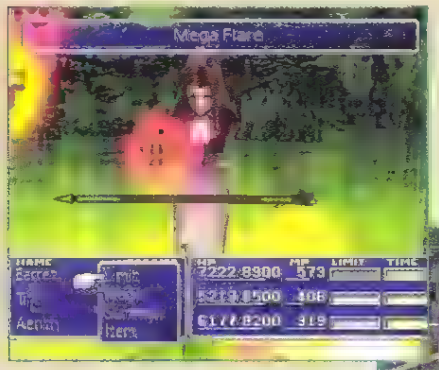


By Peter Olafson

The grass is always greener somewhere else. For years, computer gamers have asked for conversions of console role-playing games—ones that are accessible and cute as well as fun—and their wish has finally been granted. Final Fantasy VII, the first 32-bit entry in Square's celebrated RPG line, has been converted from the PlayStation. Aside from a few rough patches (some unique to this Windows 95 implementation, some inherited from the original game), this four-CD epic is accessible, cute, fun, pretty, and likely to keep you pleasantly occupied for a long time.

You're cast as a mercenary named Cloud who's working for a resistance movement preparing to bomb one of the reactors in the city of Midgar. Despite initially being in it for the money, he stays the course. Along the way he finds new allies and old friends, and his band of freedom fighters escapes the city into the wide world.

What makes FFVII special is variety. You're given a good number of choices en route—should you sneak into the Shinra HQ or just knock on the front door?—so you never know quite what'll come next. I liked the combination of fighting (in third-person 3D, but in the traditional face-off style of console games), exploration, puzzle solving, shopping, storytelling, and the exoticness of an unpredictable plot. The game is driven by combat but not dominated by it, and just when you get tired of bowling over minions, a boss-level monster wanders along and reacquaints you with the concept of death.



The PC version sports more spectacular spell-effects.

Your party comes upon a handy plane.

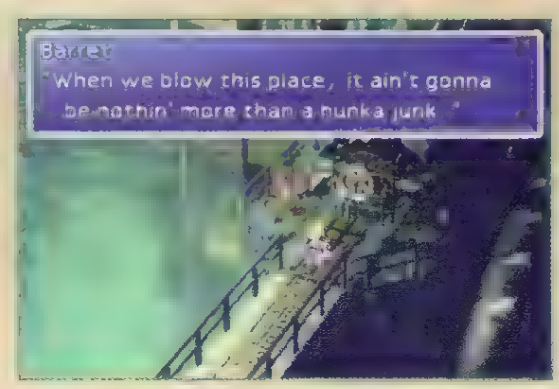
FFVII is also beautiful. The rich environments, displayed from a range of perspectives, were unlike anything the console world had seen, and they stand up particularly well on a PC with a 3D accelerator. The backdrops for the combat scenes seem to hold an inner light, and the effects for magic spells and special moves (often gorgeous) have a new momentousness.

It's otherwise the same game as on the PSX. I enjoyed its easy-going, large-print interface and the ability to move everything I found after combat into my collective inventory with the push of a button. I liked the feeling of anticipation, which never really went away.

On the other hand, you can save only in certain special spots, which may not sit well with computer RPG vets. The 3D characters are cute in their spiky, huge-eyed anime way—I ultimately found myself caring about them—but the occasional close-ups make them look like Kewpie dolls with painted-on faces, which worked against my acceptance of them.

The writing isn't exactly Hemingway, and while I got the Big Picture just fine, it was occasionally difficult to understand exactly what the writers meant in given situations. (Too bad the characters don't have their own voices.) Of course, console players might tell you that very vagueness is part of FFVII's charm, and they'd be right.

Unfortunately, there's no mouse control, and I had some trouble with the graphics. On a PC with a Voodoo Rush–based Intense 3D card, FFVII had a lot of glitches in movement mode. With a Voodoo-based Righteous 3D card, it displayed a black screen during a number of cut-scenes and all but the tail end of the sumptuous rendered intro.



You can always count on Barret to play the blustery tough guy.

I guess even when the grass is greener, you still have to deal with a few weeds. But not so many, or so well rooted, as to wreck a charming, light RPG.

FINAL FANTASY VII

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	A
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	B+

B+ OVERALL

Cloud and company make a fairly painless PC leap.

DEVELOPER	Square Soft
PUBLISHER	Eidos Interactive 800-617-8737
WEB:	www.squaresoft.com
REQUIRES:	P166 w/ 3D card, P133 w/out, 32MB RAM, 260MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	3D card based on one of the following chipsets: 3Dfx's Voodoo, Voodoo II, or Voodoo Rush; 3D Labs' Permedia 2; ATI's Rage Pro, or Intel's I740 (FFVII will also support Matrox's G200 and NEC's PowerVR Second Generation chipsets, due later this year.)
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS ▼ As in real life, no one will give you as much grief as the Boss. The first one—the giant scorpion encountered after you place the bomb in the power plant—is fairly straightforward. Use Bolt magic to maximize damage, and don't whack it while its tail is raised. The second, Air Buster, is a bit trickier. Forget honor—strike while its back is turned, and time your Limit Breaks accordingly.

Industry Giant

Be master of your domain

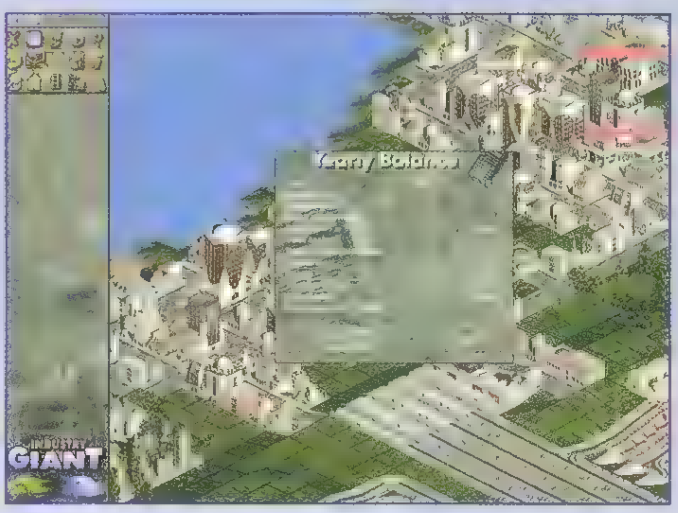
By Peter Olafson

Interactive Magic is a fun little company. I haven't always enjoyed its games a lot—notable exception: the Great Battles line—but it's always been a source of interest. The North Carolina–based publisher's prolific output has sometimes seemed a concerted effort to surpass classics from the golden age of MicroProse.

I'm not just blowing smoke. These reflections were brought on when I cracked the plastic on Industry Giant and found it bears a startling resemblance to Transport Tycoon—an engaging MicroProse business sim from 1995.

In that game, planes, ships, and trains were the focus. They're important here as well, but simply as a few of many instruments you use to reach the larger goal of dominating an industry. As operations manager for a young company, you have up to 100 years to make chairman. If you don't make the cut, you won't be able to dump the blame on anyone else, as you're in charge of doing, jeez, virtually *everything* necessary to bring the business off.

You can choose your company's product from a list of dozens, ranging from toys to computers to diamond rings. Working from a range of screenside icons and a handsome isometric grid—where the similarities to Transport Tycoon really stand out—you'll find yourself siting factories and stores; building terminals for collecting your goods and raw materials; buying trucks and setting their routes; leveling terrain; setting prices; and picking commercials. And, glory, that sentence could've been a lot longer because every variable is at your fingertips.



As the cash flows, the city grows—and you climb the corporate rungs.

Naturally, you'll also need to beat down the competition—as many as five rival companies with distinctly different approaches. The career game gives you 10 contracts to complete in a limited period. You'll also find a wide range of individual scenarios and missions. And, once you get into the swing of things, you can use the built-in editor to create your own worlds from four sets of graphics.

The fun part, of course, comes when things really get rolling: the cities expanding (from the priming of your business), the color-coded rail lines writhing with traffic, ships pulling into port, and planes soaring overhead. You'll hear church bells ringing, dogs barking, and chain saws whining. The trees look like real trees. The smokestacks smoke, and—compared to the bright, almost cartoony look of the structures in Transport Tycoon—IG's buildings are burnished and detailed.

Half the fun is just watching the technological ant-farm you've set in motion.

So far, despite the high density of things to monitor and control, I'm enjoying Industry Giant. With one caveat: It's not quite as accessible as it might've been.

You can get the hang of most computer games just by playing around with them. Not this one. While IG's not as micromanagement-oriented as a Capitalism or Destiny, its 81-page manual is definitely required reading. It's thorough and includes a strategy guide and frequent page-references for related topics, but it's very formal, almost textbook-like in tone, and lacks a step-by-step walk-through. IG does have an in-game tutorial, but it's short and about as interactive as a slide show. (That is, the game did things for me I'd rather do myself.)

C'mon: One of the key rules of business is to make the customer feel welcome. Industry Giant gives us the business in detail, but it needs a little sensitivity training. Otherwise, this is an intricate, enjoyable sim.

INDUSTRY GIANT

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	C+
GRAPHICS:	B+
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	B

B OVERALL

The Transport Tycoon concept in expanded and polished, if somewhat inaccessible, form.

PUBLISHER:	Interactive Magic 800-789-1534
WEB:	www.imagicgames.com
REQUIRES.	P90, 16MB RAM, 2MB HD, SVGA, 4x CD-ROM dr.ve
STREET PRICE:	$30

TIPS ▼ Focus your efforts on regions where there isn't any competition—or, at least, where no one else s selling your particular product. ▼ When you go for the competition's throat, don't be shy Do what stores do n real ife. Get in the r faces Move n right next door ▼ Where practica , take your t me building roads, eveling terrain, or building tunnels

Panzer Commander

By Barry Brenesal

Just tanks, and plenty of 'em

From famine to feast. Within less than a year we've gone from a dearth of tank simulations to three: iM1A2 Abrams, M1 Tank Platoon II, and now, Panzer Commander.

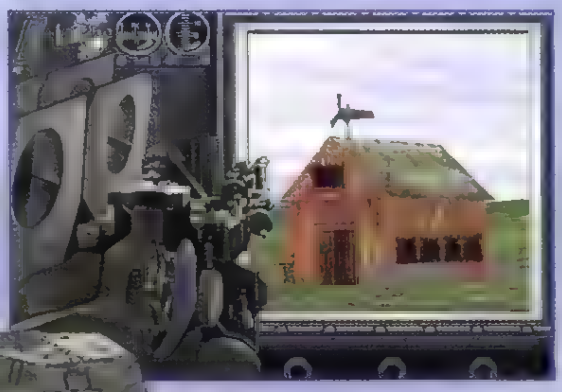
Commander features six WWII campaigns (evenly split between the Russian and German sides) with 20-plus missions each. While there aren't British or American campaigns, SSI has provided 10 standalone missions each for British, American, Russian, and German units. These are skillfully chosen to display a range of objectives, complicating factors, difficulty levels, and the qualities of more than 50 tanks—not 50 varieties of a few tanks, but 50 distinctive units, from the laughable Matilda II to the Soviet T-34 series.

You have eight different active views (F1–F8) that include an external tank view, a commander's cupola view (both buttoned and unbuttoned), a gunner's view, and so on.

The graphics are attractive and varied. Panzer Commander supports 3D hardware acceleration via Direct3D. Speed is noticeably improved with a good accelerator, particularly if you pump up the detail settings. Good as the graphical detail is, there are some notable gaps in the efforts at visual realism. Villages look like small, identical collections of anonymous buildings, and some scenarios cry out for active snow or rain.

Nature does figure into Panzer Commander as terrain, part of the system of real-world physics scrupulously applied throughout the sim. In this respect, the game is very realistic. Your tank can slide back and twist sideways if it doesn't achieve enough speed ramping up a muddy hill near Bicozh, for instance.

Someone is bound to sneer, "Yes, but I can command infantry and call on air support in M1 Tank Platoon II. Panzer Commander is unrealistic because I can't." But Commander takes place at the platoon level: You're not high enough on the food chain to order around anything more than a few tanks. The game, thankfully, also has fewer dumb choices than M1 Tank Platoon II, whose programming team didn't even think to add a binoculars view.



The gunner's view.

Panzer's AI is as complex as its visuals, research, and physics. I've watched enemy rookies flee after I destroyed a few of their vehicles and brought the rest of my platoon up over the horizon. Your personnel are rated for six classes of experience (conscript, veteran, elite, etc.) that affect morale and performance and improve across time in campaigns. Orders response is also partially conditioned by nation, with German personnel rated the highest and Russians the lowest.

The collision-avoidance AI, on the other hand, is terrible. Panzer Commander's tank drivers have a talent for upending in ditches and smashing into farmhouses. Once I was following a lightly armored vehicle when it was destroyed. My driver played bumper tag, then simply sat there. SSI says a fix is underway, but why issue a fine game with such a flaw when first impressions are so important to brand reputation?

Russian winters are cold, until enemy tanks join you to heat things up.

Of course, you can always dispense with the computer AI and network up to six players together. There are five scenarios each in four types of multiplayer games, including Capture the Flag, Teams, Melee, and Platoons. Panzer also supplies an extensive scenario editor/builder.

Reservations aside, I'd recommend Panzer Commander. It's more elaborate and looks better than iM1A2 Abrams, and it plays more realistically than M1 Tank Platoon II.

PANZER COMMANDER

GAMEPLAY:	B-
GETTING STARTED:	A-
GRAPHICS:	B+
MULTIPLAYER:	B+
SOUND CHECK:	B+

B- OVERALL

A very good platoon-level tank sim, but buy some collision insurance.

PUBLISHER:	SSI 800-601-7529
WEB:	www.panzercommander.com
REQUIRES:	P133, 16MB RAM, 2MB SVGA, 4x CD ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P166, 32MB RAM, 4MB 3D card, 8x CD ROM drive, 28.8 modem
STREET PRICE:	$59

TIPS ▼ Take advantage of terrain. Try to find locations behind small hills and walls where only your turret is visible to the enemy. ▼ Practice your platoon formations when you're given more than one tank to control. Each formation has its uses. ▼ Study the tanks you and your enemy have before you enter a scenario. Note the advantages and disadvantages of each and play to your strengths and their weaknesses. ▼ Flank enemy tanks wherever possible; don't meet them head on. Rear armor is lower, and you want to get that first shot in before their turret can lock onto you.

SIMULATION

iPanzer '44

One-handed fighting

By Peter Olafson

While in certain respects I-Magic's iPanzer '44 improves upon its iM1A2, iPanzer still travels a good deal of rocky terrain. This WWII tank sim allows you to command either a platoon or more of Soviet or German tanks during the destruction of Hitler's Army Group Center in the summer of 1944, or Americans and Germans during the Ardennes offensive in December of the same year.

It's easy to get going. Just pick a scenario from the maps in the bookshelf interface—I counted about 40 for the 116th Panzer on the Western Front alone. Or, to play a campaign, create a persona by clicking on a book.

The game's still fairly easy to play, too. iPanzer uses the same common-sense mouse and keyboard controls as iM1A2. You can keep tabs on the whole show from the zoomable overhead map or jump to certain vehicles to micromanage as gunner, driver, or commander.

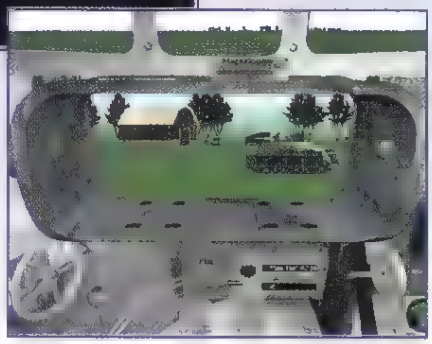
The tanks look good, the smoke doesn't.

That sense of control extends into the campaigns' direction. They're not simply one scenario after another. You're often permitted to decide the direction your unit should attack in (or whether it should fall back, as the case may be) and which of as many as a dozen approaches to adopt. iPanzer won't play the same way twice.

While not in a league with the spectacular effects in SSI's Panzer Commander, iPanzer's graphics are a distinct step up from iM1A2's. It supports 3D accelerators (via Direct3D), allowing for such nice touches as fog and a misty horizon. Much of the scenery consists of individual objects backed by texture-mapped walls—similar to Betrayal in Antara's style—and it's an appealing effect. On the other hand, some textures are ugly, some lines are jagged, and you'll find little in the way of structures other than the odd barn or roadside telephone-pole.

Unhappily, iPanzer has the same incomplete feel as iM1A2. The developer has sharply limited its scope. For starters, you're only permitted to take direct control over three medium tanks: the German Panther, the American Sherman, and the Russian T-34/85 (Aw, man: no Tigers!)—even though you can issue orders to other units, from infantry to jeeps to Howitzers to other tanks. Why?

The enemy AI is good enough to punish the player for silly mistakes, but not good enough to avoid making them. Three times my Panthers found enemy units lined up in a row, apparently oblivious to my presence, and picked them off one by one with barely a shot fired back or a tread clanking in response. By the same token, I found the enemy still advancing even when it had just a handful of infantry units left. My closest tank, out of ammo, had to chase them down and run them over to end the scenario.



There's not much man-made scenery in iPanzer, but here's a glimpse of some.

Someone's a good shot: Marder-tank hunters burning in the woods.

Multiplay isn't supported. And the more I played, the more I ran into oddities: individual tanks inexplicably became detached from their parent units; tread gears turned on some tanks but not on others; some vehicles appeared to be floating; and some maps were unreadable in pre-mission briefings.

But what iPanzer needs most is a sense of self-celebration—the sense that it's offering something special and exciting. Its presentation is bewitched by a lack of eventfulness.

IPANZER '44

GAMEPLAY:	B-
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	B
MULTIPLAYER:	N/A
SOUND CHECK:	B

C+ OVERALL

D3D, yes; multiplay, no. Less than exemplary.

PUBLISHER:	Interactive Magic 800 789-1534
WEB:	www.imagicgames.com
REQUIRES:	P133, 16MB RAM, 50MB HD, SVGA, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P200, 32MB RAM, 4MB D3D card, 8x CD-ROM drive
STREET PRICE:	$40

TIPS ▼ Don't rush into battle—it's a fast way to get your boys all shot up. ▼ Invest in a couple of forward observers. It's nice to be able to find the enemy before he finds you, then send in the tanks. ▼ Nine-tenths of the battle is position. In particular, watch those hilltops. Enemy tanks love hilltops.

SIMULATION

Independence War

The return of Warhead

By Peter Olafson

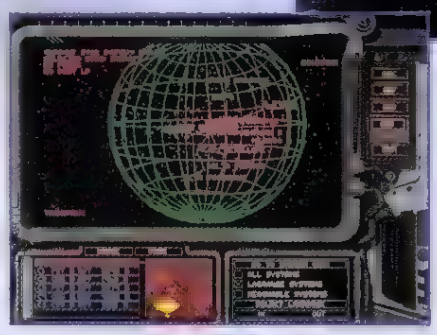
Loneliness is underrated. Back when I was writing mainly about the Amiga, I came across an English game called Warhead (Motion Picture House, 1990). It wasn't like anything else I'd played. On one 880K disk, Warhead offered a profound sense of being utterly alone in space and a tangible sensation of the surrounding distance. I was Major Tom floating in the blackness. I was Frank Bowman, out in the cold and begging HAL to open the pod bay doors.

So why am I carrying on about an eight-year-old Amiga game? Because Warhead is back, after a fashion. Under the aegis of Particle Systems, Warhead author Glyn Williams got together with Michael Powell (responsible for MicroProse's Subwar 2050) to produce the very Warhead-like Independence War for Infogrames. It supports 3Dfx chipsets (via Glide) as well as Internet and network games. And it's still not quite like anything else I've played.

You play a Commonwealth Navy officer who's been assigned command of a corvette with a glorious history. It's 2268, and the war with colonial rebels (in which the craft's former commander bravely sacrificed his life) is still raging. You're dispatched on a series of more than 40 disparate missions—from routine patrols to elaborate multiobjective assaults—to bring them to their knees.

The corvette (which looks like a fish that swallowed a saucer) may at first seem an intimidating ally. But while you have a keyboardful of controls—a joystick is essential—you'll be grateful for a series of autopilots and autopilot-like functions that allow you to handle approaches, docking, and formation flight without manual policing.

For that matter, you'll be able to intuitively identify a ship's trajectory and speed by the roller coaster–like computer-generated trail that's attached to each craft, and your own by a subtle indicator on your HUD rather than the stupid, overused high-speed starfield.

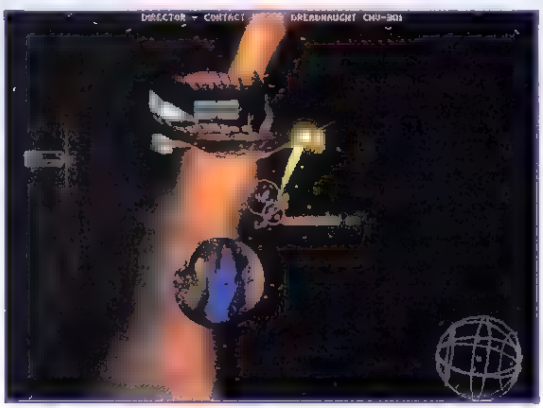


The Big Picture.

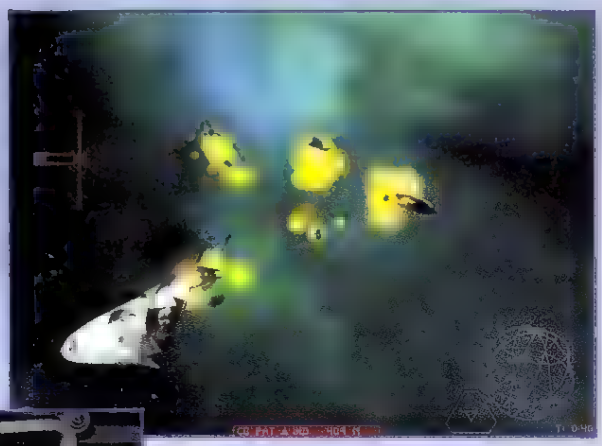
It's things like this that helped me take to IW quickly. That old Warhead feeling came flooding back, in part because of the difficulty level's careful curve, the basic, buoyant physics of the game (it's big, it's dark, it's beautiful), and the certain sly elusiveness to the missions. You're rarely just dispatched to a waypoint to blow the hell out of anything that isn't on your side. You're always challenged, always expected to think, always surprised in some way.

And even the software-based version of IW is lovely—the 3Dfx version deepens the shadows and makes objects look more solid. Its only competition is Wing Commander: Prophecy, and that's a somewhat different sort of game.

Now, all that good stuff said, IW may not be everyone's cup of tea. The controls are tightly bound to rotation along the X and Y axes. Consequently, while IW feels more authentic than many space operas (which use a more flight-sim–like model), it may take a while to get into the game, though the US version includes an arcade mode.



Your corvette opens fire on an enemy near a jump point.



With 3D acceleration, IW looks stunning.

Moreover, Independence War is too much of a big production-number for me to get the sense of mystery that Warhead gave me eight years ago. Things that felt pleasantly vague then are more explicit now.

But I can almost guarantee that, when you're out there in the blackness, you'll feel profoundly alone.

INDEPENDENCE WAR

GAMEPLAY:	A-
GETTING STARTED:	B+
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	B+

A- OVERALL

The loneliest space sim around.

DEVELOPER:	Particle Systems
PUBLISHER	Infogrames
WEB	www.independencewar.com
REQUIRES	P90, 16MB RAM, 35MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P200, 32MB RAM, Voodoo-based 3D card
STREET PRICE	$50

TIPS ▼ Even the training missions are tricky. In Advanced Nav, the instructor will soon leave you lost in space unless you kick in the autopilot to follow him. (Don't even bother trying manual control.) The remaining mines in the live-fire exercise can be picked off at your leisure once you've blown up the hulk. To do that quickly (thus keeping the mines to a minimum), make for its Achilles heel—the back—and open fire. ▼ In the Battle Royale, the best principle is to make immediate and appropriate use of available resources. Dock with the supply ships for refills on missiles and get new wingmen into the formation ASAP.

HardBall 6

Building a dynasty

By Daniel Morris

I owned the original HardBall on the Apple IIe, back when there were only two teams in the game and their rosters were made up of players named after the designers. Accolade has come a long way in the intervening years, and with every evolutionary leap that HardBall's made, the game has remained the glittering star franchise of the company's stable.

HardBall 6 pushes the series to yet another level of excellence. Unlike the majority of sports games, which add only a few tweaks and bonuses to their annual cash-cow releases, this sequel offers a sweeping overhaul of an already loaded game.

The biggest addition (and selling point) is its full 3D graphics, offering polygonal players in a D3D-supported engine. And it's heartening to see that Accolade added 3D without subtracting from its signature gameplay, which is still clean, simple, and true to life. For realism, pace, and ability to hold the sustained interest of a genuine baseball fan, HardBall 6 is way ahead of its more gaudy, thrill-seeking competitor Triple Play 99. It also eclipses newcomer Baseball 3D 1998, though the latter's polys are perhaps a touch prettier.

The motion capture of the players is very authentic, with a dynamic camera that moves intelligently to follow the action—there are no TV-style "cuts" that require an adjustment when fielding or base-running.

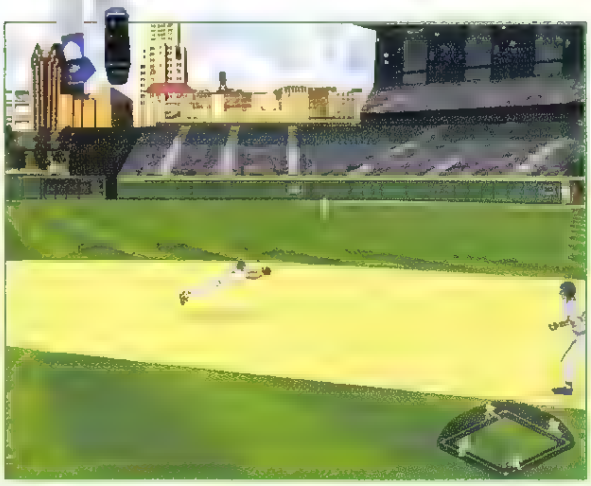
The truly deep managerial package will also make amateur GMs very happy. Consecutive-season play is included (finally!), allowing you to craft a team through the years. There's a rookie draft at the start of each season, and players develop through the seasons and in the minor leagues.

The computer AI is programmed to trade based on the specific needs of the team, which means that you have to think realistically when making moves. If you need a slugger and possess a glut of pitchers, find a hitter on a team that suffers from a thin bullpen. Taking care of each other's needs keeps you involved and entertained by the other teams in your league and makes the multiseason sim the only way to get the most enjoyment out of HardBall 6.

The game features free head-to-head Internet play on Mplayer and on NetAccolade, the publisher's on-site server. NetAccolade isn't the best match-up server in the world, and it's occasionally difficult to access, but Mplayer gets the job done just fine.

For people of a historical bent, HardBall 6 also includes a wonderful All-Time Team composed of heroes like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Jackie Robinson. The best part is its biographical/career summary of each of the 24 greats. It offers a ton of surprisingly entertaining info on the game's legends.

If HardBall 6 suffers from anything, it's the inevitable jerkiness of any first-time 3D effort. Line drives occasionally get hit with bazooka speed, and there are a lot of clipping problems when players come together: an outfielder and infielder coming close on a pop-up can sometimes fuse into a four-armed, bestial thing with two gloves. But such distractions never lessen the enjoyment of the game. For my money, HardBall 6 is the most complete package for Major League Baseball on the PC.



This snaring grab at a line drive shows the nicely motion-captured polygonal players.

A big play at the plate. Hope the catcher's made of rock.

HARDBALL 6

GAMEPLAY:	A-
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	B+
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	B

A- OVERALL

The staple of computer baseball gets a 3D upgrade.

PUBLISHER	Accolade 800-245-7744
WEB:	www.accolade.com
REQUIRES:	P100, 16MB RAM, 20MB HD, 16-bit sound card, 4x CD ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P133, D3D card
STREET PRICE:	$50

TIPS ▼ Learn to use the Swing Type feature when you bat. Button 1 will be a normal swing, Button 2 will more likely produce a ground ball, and Button 3 will more likely produce a fly ball. Button 3 is especially useful when you want to advance a runner on a sac fly. ▼ They're not kidding when they say a pitcher needs to be warmed up before he comes in. Give relievers at least an inning in the bullpen, or they won't be able to find the strike zone. ▼ You can import your own custom team logo as a .PCX file in the Team Summary screen.

Microsoft Baseball 3D

Skin-deep slugger

Microsoft Baseball 3D is a grand-looking game: Direct3D support brings out the full glory of its exquisitely rendered players and stadiums. Visually, this is the most impressive baseball game out there; and in a field glutted with contenders, that's a big edge.

Microsoft offers up some of the best baseball-graphics ever.

The motion-captures of the players, the immediate recognizability of their scanned faces, and the accurate body builds and stances create a convincing world of major league baseball. Of all the baseball titles currently on deck, B3D does the best job of providing an immersive, "Gee, I'm actually looking at baseball" experience.

The trouble is, Microsoft still has work to do before the gameplay matches the graphics. The ball physics are not perfect, and you'll see a lot of laser line-drives blaze over the infield only to drop supernaturally fast in the outfield. The pitcher-batter duel, which is the heart of baseball, is kind of flat in its presentation here, with perhaps a bit less insight and innovation than in competitors like HardBall 6 or Triple Play 99. And the trend toward an intuitive, transparent pitcher-batter interface hasn't yet made its way to Microsoft: the game remains very menu-driven and Windowsy.

B3D's transfixing graphics have earned it a place in the bigs; now Microsoft needs to ramp up the gameplay to ensure that players stick around. Unless you just can't resist the looks, I'd recommend waiting until the next version, which'll hopefully inject as much excitement into its gameplay as its graphics.

—Daniel Morris

MS BASEBALL 3D

GAMEPLAY:	C
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	A-
MULTIPLAYER:	C+
SOUND CHECK:	B-

C+ OVERALL

Grand-slam graphics, mediocre gameplay.

PUBLISHER	Microsoft 800-426-9400
WEB:	www.microsoft.com/games/
REQUIRES:	P90, 16MB RAM, 80MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
RECOMMENDED	P120, 32MB RAM
STREET PRICE:	$50

High Heat Baseball

Another rookie

As if there weren't enough players in the already overcrowded baseball genre, 3DO has called up High Heat Baseball in an attempt to carve out a share of the market for its own. With the help of developer Team .366, this rookie entry hopes to go head-to-head with the established baseball franchises.

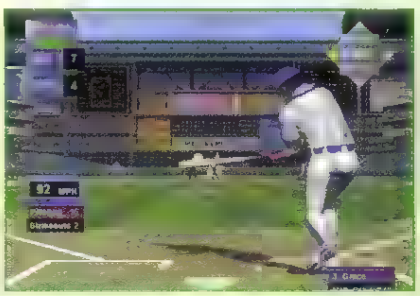
The good news is that High Heat isn't a bad game. Its graphics aren't up to the level of Microsoft's or EA's baseball titles (though it supports 3Dfx and D3D), but its solid gameplay is fun and fast. The game sells itself as one for hardcore baseball enthusiasts, with catchphrases like "We believe in soaking up the optimism of opening day." Indeed, it does pay more attention to baseball's off-field dimension than most. Roster management and trading is an engaging side game, including the monitoring of your minor-league farm club and calling up prospects. But it isn't deep enough to be a selling point of its own.

All the big-league stadiums are modeled, including the new Giants park—though you won't find any Giants.

Because High Heat lacks a major-league license, you have to settle for generic uniforms and logos, which is becoming increasingly inexcusable in a serious sports game. Thankfully, the Major League Baseball Players Association license is here, granting you access to the pro players.

Ultimately, High Heat Baseball's general competence only serves to recall the more impressive arcade gameplay of Triple Play 99, the much more convincing realism of HardBall 6, and the deeper managerial aspects of Baseball Mogul. High Heat comes up a bit short in its first at-bat, but Team .366 and 3DO have enough of a game here to warrant developing a franchise.

—Daniel Morris



Lackluster graphics keep the pitcher-batter duels from becoming too addictive.

HIGH HEAT BASEBALL

GAMEPLAY:	C+
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	B-
MULTIPLAYER:	C+
SOUND CHECK:	B

C+ OVERALL

Decent baseball, but nothing to make headlines.

DEVELOPER:	Team .366
PUBLISHER:	3DO 800-336-3506
WEB:	www highheat com
REQUIRES:	P133, 32MB RAM, 100MB HD, 4x CD ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P166
STREET PRICE:	$50

Cyberstorm 2

The HERCs are back—resistance is futile

By Andy Mahood

Sierra's Cyberstorm 2: Corporate Wars offers the classic turn-based format employed in 1996's precursor MissionForce: Cyberstorm, but Dynamix went a step further and included a real-time mode. The game's interface permits you to toggle back and forth between each mode with a single mouse-click (although if you're in the middle of a campaign, you must wait until your present battle is complete before the change takes effect). This feature alone gives CS2 a sizable leg up on most other strategy games.

Like its parent, CS2 is set in the EarthSiege universe. Instead of controlling a fleet of mechs (or HERCs, in Cyberstorm-speak) through a first-person perspective, you must coordinate all of your battles and campaigns in classic top-down, tile-based wargame fashion. Despite some borrowed EarthSiege elements, CS2 remains a no-nonsense strategy game, and a pretty comprehensive one at that.

You'll spend a fair amount of time [illegible] **and modifying your HERCs**

Much of your time is spent at the main battle map, where your selected group of HERCs, tanks, and anti-grav vehicles must be deployed against varying levels of enemy resistance over an assortment of terrains. Between each mission there are also a wealth of research and construction options to pursue at the main-base operations screen.

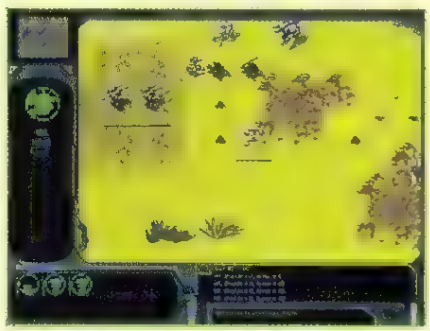
The biggest change—aside from the option to play in real time—is the sheer volume of new toys at your disposal. Where the original had just 8 vehicles and 69 weapons with which to fight off the malevolent Cybrids, CS2 offers no less than 27 modifiable chassis and 171 different weapon types. The pool of Bioderms (artificial life-forms that offer superior HERC piloting and fighting performance) has been enlarged significantly, and gamers are now permitted to grow and modify their own unique creations. Another change is the elimination of the Cybrids. As the game's subtitle suggests, the conflict centers around eight different corporations vying for wealth, power, and mining rights in the remote Typhoeus star system.

Each company boasts specific strengths and weaknesses ranging from financial resources to weapons technology. By selecting one over the other at the beginning of a campaign, you effectively have eight storylines to choose from.

CS2 combines a dynamic-mission generator with a number of hard-scripted missions to maximize the variety and entertainment factors of each of these crusades, which can result in over 100 missions.

Multiplayer options include two-player serial/modem as well as eight-player LAN and Net match-ups. Free tournament play will also be available on Sierra's WON network, although I've yet to be impressed with any multiplayer game on that less than rock-solid service.

The 2D SVGA graphics in CS2 don't have the same level of detail and texture as, say, Total Annihilation. Maps can be zoomed up to 18x, but topographical features such as trees, lakes, and hills are represented as simple 2D etchings that do little to suspend a player's disbelief. The game's audio is, however, quite immersive. The blood-curdling shriek of a doomed Bioderm facing imminent death in his burning HERC is a sound I won't forget any time soon.



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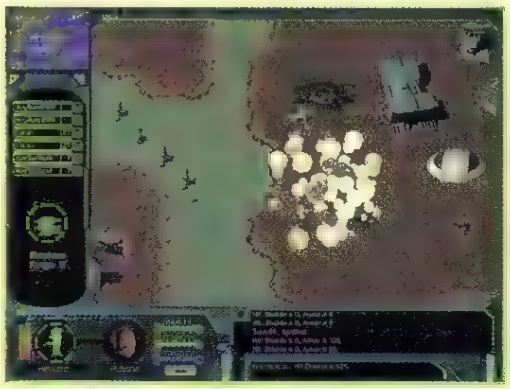


[illegible] **and upgraded**

CS2 is one of those games that works its way under your skin like a benevolent parasite and then slowly begins to take over your life. It may not be the easiest game to learn or the prettiest strategy game on the market, but I didn't make it to bed before 3 a.m. for several nights running, and I can't think of a more sincere endorsement for a game.

CYBERSTORM 2

GAMEPLAY:	B+
GETTING STARTED:	C-
GRAPHICS:	C
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	A

B+ OVERALL

Both turn-based and RTS fans can sink their keyboards into this one.

[illegible]: Dynamix
[illegible]: Sierra On-Line
[illegible]: 800-757-7707
[illegible]: www.sierra.com
[illegible]: P133, 24MB RAM, 50MB HD, SVGA, 4x CD-ROM drive
[illegible]: P200, 32MB RAM, 6x CD-ROM drive
[illegible]: $40

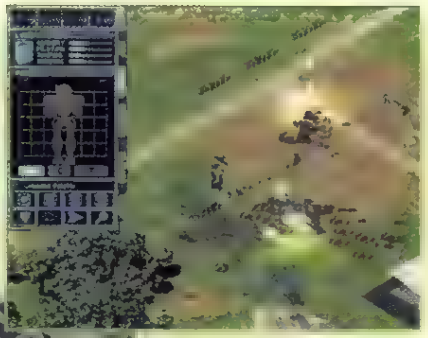
TIPS ▼ Your best means of developing proficiency with the game is by taking on a full campaign. The Quickstart single missions stack ridiculously heavy firepower against you, and the two training missions are so basic they're all but useless. ▼ When performing an exploration mission, leave your slower HERCs back at the insertion point. They'll slow you down tremendously if you take them cross-country, but they can prove invaluable in fighting off the inevitable wave of enemies that appears late in the battle to cut off your escape route. ▼ Build up your base turret guns as quickly as possible. Once you get them to Level 4 or beyond, they can vaporize most enemy threats without help from your vehicles. (It's still a good idea to have one vehicle around with reclamation abilities to scoop up all the valuable scrap powerful turrets create.)

MechCommander

Beyond (pre-sold) BattleTech

By Matt Holmes

For a long time I've admired the BattleTech universe, where political intrigue starts and finishes over the smoking remains of gigantic mechs. Who hasn't wanted to command a band of 50-ton behemoths eager to unload hot death on those who would oppose them? FASA Interactive and MicroProse give you the power with a real-time version of their popular BattleTech game.



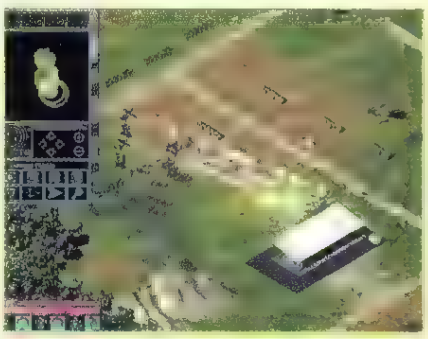
Operating in the same period as MechWarrior 2, you command a group of Inner Sphere mechs fighting the Smoke Jaguar Clan in a battle to reclaim the recently conquered Port Arthur.

Like a plate of Mississippi Mud Pie, MechCommander is a delicious treat that's not just enjoyable, but both messy and frustrating. There are a number of problems that hold this game back from achieving greatness.

It definitely has all the eye-candy one would expect—the smoke-trailing missiles, the bright burn of laser bursts, and the ground-shaking explosions of destroyed fusion cores. The rendering of the mechs, vehicles, and surrounding terrain was a delight. Trees toppled to the ground when bashed by my mechs, sad little men emerged from the smoking wreckage of vehicles I destroyed, and blown-off fragments of enemy mechs slid over the ground. It would've been even better-looking in 16-bit—rather than its 8-bit—color.

But the graphics couldn't quite hypnotize me into ignoring MechCommander's few but painful gameplay flaws. Dealing with its total lack of AI was almost as challenging as defeating the clans. When ordered to attack, my mechs moved to range and stood there, *stock still*, shooting until someone died. What trained pilot would stand in front of a mech twice their weight class and trade rounds? This was such a frequent occurrence that I was able to use artillery strikes—which take a good 5 to 15 seconds to arrive—on motionless enemy mechs.

These guys also have the worst targeting skills I've seen since Space Invaders. I can literally stand still right next to an enemy and miss, miss, miss—for minutes. If I were really in that mech, after a while I'd just use my arm to crack the enemy's cockpit glass and kill him with the built-up heat from my laser barrel.



Certainly a favorite tactic in all mech games is blowing limbs off one's opponent in order to disable and salvage, rather than to kill. When I ordered my mechs to do this, they would spend so much time missing the limb that my less discriminating enemy, busy hammering away at my torso, would blast me into steel confetti. As a result, combat is mostly a face-to-face brawl.

Notably absent were some of the more critical strategic elements of the BattleTech universe. Since MechCommander ignores mech heat and weight, you can always go into combat with the biggest and most powerful guns.

Despite these AI flaws and watered-down BattleTech elements, I did find myself enjoying the challenge of the 30 missions, which range from search-and-destroy to rescue and base-defense scenarios. The selection of mechs and their weapons are more than enough to keep you busy trying out different combinations to send into the fray. With a little effort, you can work around the brain-dead AI and have a blast—literally.

MECHCOMMANDER

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	A
MULTIPLAYER:	A-
SOUND CHECK:	A

B+ OVERALL

Detailed graphics and rich BattleTech universe are undermined by simplified game mechanics.

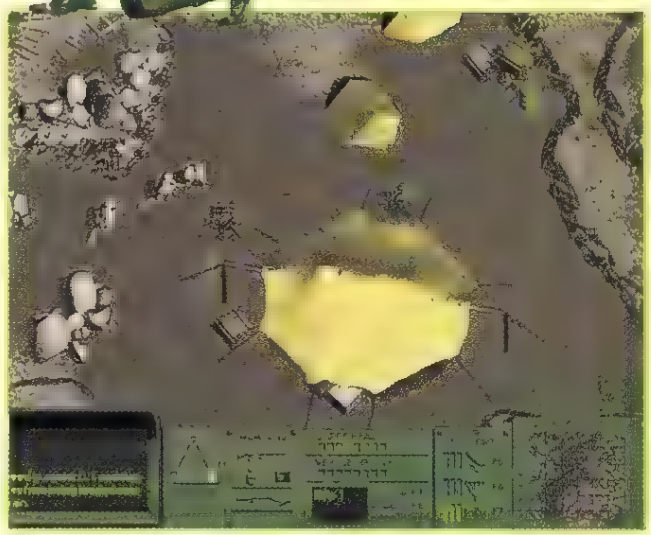
FASA Interactive
MicroProse
800-879-7529
www.microprose.com
P133, 16MB RAM, 160MB HD, 4x CD-ROM drive
P166, 32MB RAM
$55

▼ Missiles, missiles, missiles Whatever type you choose, they'll hit what your walleyed pilots cannot. ▼ Mass-attack your enemies If you hit a single target with multiple weapons at once, it will usually fall down, allowing you free hits ▼ On rescue missions, send a single light mech and run straight in and out to retrieve your target. The extremely low drop weight will yield big resource points ▼ Lure pursuing enemy mechs near fuel tanks or explosive containers. Shooting the containers will create large explosions that can disable or destroy even the largest mechs

Army Men

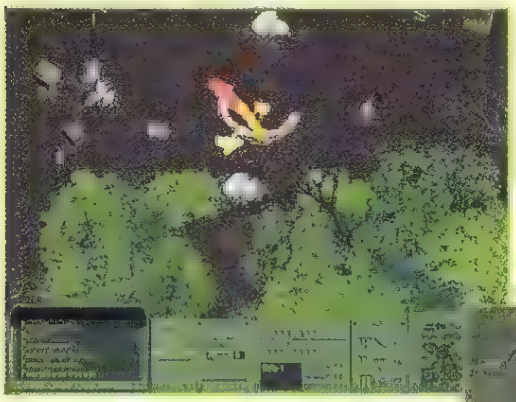
The green and the tan

By Andy Mahood



3DO's Army Men is a refreshing blast from the past for anyone who ever spent time staging epic battles between little green and tan plastic soldiers—especially those of us who felt the need to introduce such Weapons of Mass Destruction as BB guns, magnifying glasses, and firecrackers into the conflict.

Offered as a real-time strategy/*action* title, Army Men never makes the mistake of taking itself too seriously—which is good, because the basic premise of the game is sandlot simple. Through a top-down, map-based screen familiar to most combat-strategy gamers, you control a single character called Sarge as he soldiers his way through a number of commando missions against waves of enemy Tan forces. Along the way, he gets the chance to use a variety of different weapons ranging from a standard rifle to bazookas, mortars, grenades, and even flamethrowers. Every so often Sarge is given the opportunity to motor around in a jeep, half-track, or tank. Sometimes he even leads a small platoon of soldiers into the fray. Unfortunately, he has little control over how well these bumbling recruits will fight or perform their assigned tasks.



Fire and plastic don't mix

In addition to a comprehensive Boot Camp training module, Army Men offers three campaigns for a total of 28 pre-scripted missions over desert, alpine, and swamp terrains. The landscape is littered with a variety of conventional power-ups as well as unconventional ones, like mine detectors and air support. Using them effectively is one of the keys to success—it's not uncommon for Sarge to be outgunned by a 50-to-1 ratio.

The graphics are quite detailed and attractive for an unaccelerated game, but you can't zoom the maps to any greater level of detail than the default 640-by-480. Elevation changes are represented by subtle ridge lines that Sarge is unable to cross, which forces you to send him and his squad on long, circuitous routes. This Chutes & Ladders approach wouldn't be too bad if the enemy AI wasn't allowed to ambush you from hidey-holes located *outside* the map borders. Many of my well-planned and executed missions failed because of this unfair advantage (and I'm sure Sarge had a few choice words for the programmers when I had to restart missions from the beginning because you can only save after successful missions).

Positional advantages aside, the enemy soldiers' AI is almost as bad as your own platoon-mates'. I often encountered Tan riflemen running right by me and still not clueing in to my presence; and friendly-fire casualties are pretty common because your guys have a nasty habit of shooting first and aiming later.

I don't expect Army Men's substandard AI or limited number of pre-scripted missions will sway hardcore RTS players toward the game in any great numbers. However, despite its lack of sophistication and depth, the game is still a wonderfully entertaining and addictive RTS/action hybrid. With HEAT.net and Mplayer support (as well as LAN and serial/modem), Army Men could easily develop a huge online following. It's campy, it's retro, and hey, what kid between 8 and 80 can resist the opportunity to blow up scores of those little plastic soldiers with high-powered weapons or melt them into little puddles of colored goo with a flamethrower?

ARMY MEN

GAMEPLAY:	B
GETTING STARTED:	A
GRAPHICS:	C
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	C
OVERALL	B-

Welcome childish humor transforms an otherwise average RTS game.

Studio 3DO
900-336-3506
www 3do com
P90, 115MB HD, 16MB RAM, 1MB SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive
P133, 24MB RAM, 2MB SVGA, 4x CD-ROM drive
$40

Tip: Take the mortar whenever one becomes ava lab e. They can take out tanks with a single well placed shot and are the easiest weapon to aim

Dominion: Storm Over Gift3

Riders on the Storm

By Chris Hudak

Talk about strangers bearing gifts. Ion Storm is usually linked with the first-person shooter genre thanks to its founder being John Romero, yet its first offering is in the crowded real-time strategy genre.

Ion's genre-virginity will justifiably make some gamers wary. Rest assured that the company knows what it's doing. After producer Todd Porter came to Ion, he lobbied to get Dominion from 7th Level, where he'd worked on the game previously. He finished it up at Ion with style, giving even the lofty Starcraft a friendly slap in passing by providing not three but four different races.

True, the distinctions between the races—the insidious, wandering Mercs; the creeping, patient Darken; the nimble, hive-jacking Scorps; and of course the relatively wholesome but rather ho-hum Humans—can be a bit of a reach. But they are different, especially as regards their special "X-Tech" attack units, which sport unique, sneaky abilities. The Mercs, for example, can "remote" an enemy unit, jamming its routines and making it think it belongs to the Mercs. The Darken, true to their name, possess battlefield-cloaking technology. Scorps are liable to use their digger units to tunnel underground and resurface at the most inconvenient times and places, like right in the middle of your base when you're facing a materials crisis, perhaps to unload their cargo of infantry or, if you're really unlucky, engineers.

In a truly inspired gameplay scheme, engineers in Dominion transcend the merely useful and occasionally nasty antics of Red Alert's surly breaking-and-entering artists. They enter the realm of the utterly evil and infuriating by "virusing" enemy structures. This high-tech intrusion can leave the infectee with lingering, painful, almost syphilitic consequences such as informational battlefield blindness, troop rebellions, damaged buildings, the hemorrhaging of embezzled resources, and defective-unit production. It even sabotages infrastructural defenses, leaving automated guard-towers taking the occasional friendly fire potshot at his/her own units for yuks.

the many options available for each unit.

The automatic same-unit-selection command groups like unit types, so you can execute attacks in efficient waves.

Beyond the differences in various races' unit abilities, Dominion also has a couple of logical, hadda-happen gameplay hooks and improvements that—it must be ungratefully said—dialed-in RTSers will likely take for granted: buildable bridges, defensive posturing (kneeling or crawling infantry as opposed to marching, high-profile targets), veteran units, and the like.

Dominion claims "the most sophisticated AI in a real-time strategy game," and while I'm still not so sure about that, it can be pretty smart. While many a Red Alert or even Total Annihilation enemy force will piecemeal its way into the maw of your defenses the second it detects you (giving you the time and the spread to take it out), the computer enemies in Dominion know that just because they see you, it doesn't necessarily mean they should walk up and shake hands. Like as not you'll come rushing up on *their* position; in fact, in some of the earlier missions, you won't have a choice. More so than most RTS games, Dominion gives the player a pleasingly goading sense that the AI is constantly looking at you cross-eyed and giving you the finger.

The only thing neater than building your own bridge is blowing up somebody else's—especially if they're crossing it at the time.

Dominion looks great, sounds okay (somebody could've spent a few more development hours on varying the audio unit-responses), has the full complement of multiplayer options (eight players via LAN and Internet), and offers enough variety for even the snootiest genre-complacent gamer to take a chance on a dark horse. Just don't stand too close to this one—it has some hooves, let me tell you.

DOMINION

GAMEPLAY:	
GETTING STARTED:	
GRAPHICS:	
MULTIPLAYER:	
SOUND CHECK:	

B
OVERALL

Ion's RTS entree sports some innovations and good AI.

Developer	Ion Storm
Publisher	Eidos Interactive 800 617 8737
Web	www.eidos.com
Requires	P166, 32MB RAM 4x CD-ROM drive
Recommended	P200, 64MB RAM, 8x CD-ROM drive
Street Price	$46

▼ If possible, have at least a few cadet soldiers guarding fringe installations—they're not a huge investment, and during the heat of battle they'll provide a last ditch defense against virusing, which you don't want. ▼ When preparing a Darken siege, remember to select Passive Cloak for invisible units; otherwise, they may attack a passing enemy and expose themselves prematurely. ▼ Remember to defend your umbilicals. Nothing's so galling as having your entire strategy subverted by a wandering enemy force that lucks upon a critical link in the power chain and destroys it.

World Cup 98

FIFA 98.5

Riding on the success of FIFA 98 and hoping to capitalize on the World Cup hype, EA Sports wants you to rush out and buy World Cup 98, even if you own the previous installment. But before you break your piggy banks, consider this: FIFA 98 is still a great soccer game, and FIFA 99 could be released by year's end. Do you really need WC98?

Its AI is significantly better than FIFA 98's—especially in terms of goal tending. The keeper now knows the difference between a shot and a long lob. Best of all, your teammates will attack the ball and block passes and shots without your having to control them.

The keeper gives up a goal.

WC98 also introduces the new In-Game Management (IGM) system. You control up to three different formations and strategies at the touch of a button. You can also call plays on the fly: an Offside Trap and an Attacking Press to complement your defense, and a Through Ball Run or Wing Back to energize your offense. There are also new moves and the ability to replay eight classic matches.

Fortunately, these new features don't come at the expense of beloved old ones—the perfect motion-captured graphics, well-executed TV-style presentation, good soundtrack (WC98's is new), passback mode, one-timers, and authentic crowd chants. What's missing are the "arguing" penalty animations, a lot of the teams (WC98 features 40) and leagues, and indoor soccer.

So is it more than just an over-glorified patch? I think so. If you love soccer and don't have FIFA, WC98 is a fantastic sports game. If you own FIFA 98 and have downloaded its AI and D3D patch (**www.ea.com/techsupp/**), you'll have to decide if WC98's additional features are worth it to you.

—Nash Werner

WORLD CUP 98

GAMEPLAY:	A
GETTING STARTED:	A-
GRAPHICS:	A
MULTIPLAYER:	A
SOUND CHECK:	B+

A OVERALL

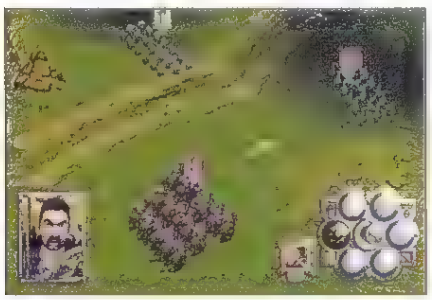
A must-have for the have-nots.

DEVELOPER	EA Sports
PUBLISHER	Electron c Arts 800 245 4525
WEB:	www.easports.com
REQUIRES:	P100, 16MB RAM, 15MB HD, 4x CD ROM drive
RECOMMENDED:	P166, 32MB RAM, 3D card, 28.8 modem, gamepad
STREET PRICE:	$50

Warhammer: Dark Omen

Dead Men Stalking

Warhammer's fabled fantasy universe gets a stunning graphics face-lift and ditches its turn-based roots for real-time action in Dark Omen, Games Workshop's sequel to Horned Rat. You play Captain Bernhardt, a hardened mercenary called upon to fight hordes of Undead—orcs, skeletons, goblins, necromancers, and so on—who've risen from the grave to fight for their king. You command a fearsome army of infantry, calvary, archers, dwarves, cannons, and wizards.



Line-of-sight and terrain play an important role in battles.

The animations and movies setting up the story are stunning, but the real fun is on the battlefield, which is on a 3D, fully rotatable plane, à la Myth. An elegant point-and-click menu gives you full command of your troops, and a full-map option gives you a bird's-eye view to help with initial troop placement.

DO's gameplay forces you to balance magic and brute strength. After each battle, you can buy fresh replacements, and survivors gain experience. You can also distribute magic items, which can greatly compensate for certain troop weaknesses. Multiplayer options include serial cable, modem to modem, LAN, and TCP/IP, and the game's also on Mplayer. Build your army from the Allied, Greenskin, or Undead troops, then jump into battle.

The long, branching campaign lets you decline missions, and every choice you make will affect your options and future. DO is worth replaying just to see its different plotlines. While it's not perfect—you can't save in mid-battle or adjust game speed—it does include nice extras, like a robust tutorial, helpful hints and suggestions as you progress, and a battle editor.

Dark Omen offered me everything I wanted in an RTS: a great story, multiple troop types, and intense and challenging battles in beautiful environments.

—Michael Cameron

DARK OMEN

GAMEPLAY:	A-
GETTING STARTED:	B
GRAPHICS:	A
MULTIPLAYER:	B
SOUND CHECK:	B

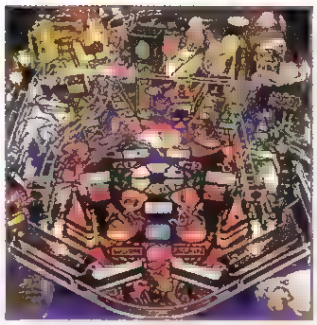
A- OVERALL

Might and magic in a dark time.

DEVELOPER:	Games Workshop
PUBLISHER:	Electronic Arts 800 245 4525
WEB:	www.darkomen.com
REQUIRES:	P120, 16MB RAM, 85MB HD
RECOMMENDED:	P133, 32MB RAM, D3D card
STREET PRICE:	$45

Addiction Pinball

We're hooked



With Worms 2 and now Addiction Pinball, Team 17 is on a hot-game roll. This is the best pinball sim since Empire's Pro Pinball: Timeshock!, a *PC Games* A-Lister.

AP's gameplay and graphics (you can select resolution, color, and detail level) are as awesome as Timeshock's. While the latter had better sound, AP offers two tables to Timeshock's one, both based on Team 17 games (World Rally Fever and Worms).

You can also view the table from five angles, one a sideways perspective where the monitor must be turned on its side (though the menu screens stay right-side up). And AP offers hotseat multiplay for up to four players.

With some of the best physics I've ever experienced, a large variety of dot-matrix subgames, the ability to nudge and tilt the table both upward and left and right, and the option to post your score on the Web, Addiction lives up to its name. (See expanded review on **www.pcgames.com**.)

—Joe McCloud

Developer	Team 17
Publisher	MicroProse 800 879 7529
Web	www.micro prose.com
Street Price	$35

A- OVERALL

Burnout: Drag Racing

Tire-smokin' fun

Do you choose the Pontiac or the Ford? The V6 or V8? And which works better with Pizza Cutter tires? No, you're not customizing the family station wagon—these are the choices you get in Burnout: Championship Drag Racing, a joint venture from Bethesda Softworks and *Hot Rod Magazine*. There hasn't been a drag-racing sim for almost 10 years, and enthusiasts say it's about time.

Select and customize a car with over 60 options—everything from the engine to the cam shaft to the transmission to the chute. You'll find yourself fiddling for hours, then peeling down one of the 22 tracks for about 8 seconds. Voodoo II support ensures skid-mark-inducing graphics.

Bethesda's Web site offers new tracks, an area for posting recorded races, and downloadable cars. And multiplay is easy to set up and includes support for Mplayer.

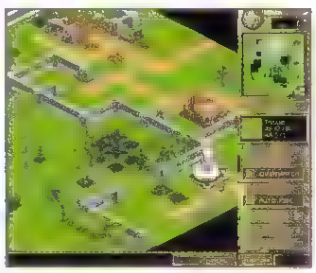
If drag racing's your thing, this game will seem like a long-overdue gift. *—Danny W. Lam*

Developer	Bethesda/*Hot Rod*
Publisher	Bethesda 800 677-0700
Web	www.beth soft.com
Street Price	$40

B+ OVERALL

Liberation Day

Strategy-deficient



In I-Magic's Liberation Day, the sequel to Fallen Haven, the fine planet of Nu Haven is under alien control. It's your job to liberate it with a small variety of land, sea, and air units. Each has its own upgradability level, which increases its action and armor points.

Gameplay is split into phases—you must deploy your units before you engage in turn-based battle. For every engagement, you have a limited number of reinforcements available. In the campaign game, you also go through a building phase, where you acquire resources and build up your base.

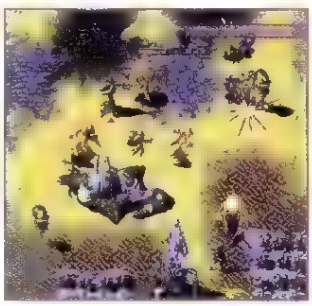
LD's battle maps are small compared to other strategy games', and the number and variety of units are very limiting. The fights quickly become monotonous because the game really requires very little strategy—just overwhelming numbers. If you're into fantasy and sci-fi turn-based wargames, you're better off with Star General or Fantasy General. *—Chris Tou*

Developer	Les Productions Micomeq
Publisher	Interactive Magic 800-789-1534
Web	www.imagic games.com
Street Price	$40

C OVERALL

Warbreeds

Recycled genes



Set amid the ongoing wars between a distant planet's four alien clans, Warbreeds' big hook is that enemy carcasses can be used to equip your own warriors with newer, more powerful weapons and abilities—a nicely gruesome concept.

The biogenetic mix-and-matching of the nimble lizard-warriors, insectile swarmers, lumbering swamp-brutes, and demonic guerrilla-fighters allows for thousands of weaponry combinations, though only a few stand out. You'll eventually work up to exotic mixes of genetic abilities and weaponry that engender fine tactical subtleties, but the road there is a barren and ugly one.

Warbreeds' bio-organic, earth-toned motif seems to mush together graphic elements.

Worst of all, this "new" real-timer looks and feels queerly behind the times—not in an evocative, nostalgic way, but in a "Why didn't they hire a few more artists?" way. With so many other stylish RTS choices out there, hold off on Warbreeds and wait for something prettier to evolve. *—Chris Hudak*

Publisher	Red Orb 800-567-2610
Web	www.red orb.com
Street Price	$30

C- OVERALL

Baseball Mogul 99

Strat's worthy challenger

For years I've found no rivals to the Strat-O-Matic dynasty. Until now.

Baseball Mogul lets you play with lineup and rotation, but it focuses on the Big Picture—bringing players up to The Show and sending them down to Triple A, addressing contract renewals and trades, and trying to keep the team in the black by tinkering with broadcast rights and ticket prices.

But lest you think this is simply baseball with cash flow, there's in-game rolling play-by-play, and one of its biggest improvements is the "headline" feature, where notable games are reduced to sports-page blurbs. Nothing's more fun than reading about your team's exploits in this familiar format, even if it sometimes highlights seemingly irrelevant game moments.

It could still use some tweaks, like devising friendlier ways to handle a multiplayer league and data printout, but Mogul's definitely a comer. Next year, all bets are off. —*Peter Olafson*

Publisher	WizardWorks 800-229-2714
Web	www.wiz works.com
Street Price	$35

B+ OVERALL

Strat-O-Matic 3.0

Stat junkies rejoice

The tweaks and tune-ups in v. 3.0 of this masterful stat-oriented baseball make for a scrupulously realistic sim.

The designers have improved a semirealistic injury system to include 60-day outages and less-predictable player availability; included new rules that better address overuse of players who didn't appear every day; let you import computer-manager settings (invisible to other players in PBM games); and incorporated a printed manual. They've also supplemented the newspaper recap with line-score reports of the previous day's hot-shot performances and updated All-Star balloting totals. And to make the computer-game experience more like the tabletop one, they've incorporated (for $10 more) images of the dice-game's cards.

The games are still played in 2D black-and-white. (Color stadiums are an extra $28.) But if you're seriously into batting averages vs. lefties and home runs per 9 IP, you simply can't do better than SOM 3.0. —*Peter Olafson*

Publisher	Strat O Matic Game Co 800-645-3455
Web	www.strat-o-matic.com
Street Price	From $32 (v. 2.0 upgrade without cards) to $65 (new purchase with cards)

A– OVERALL

Microsoft Golf 1998 Edition

Not up to par

Even though Links LS and the Jack Nicklaus series dominate the critics' leader board for PC golf titles, it's Microsoft's golf series that continues to be the all-time best-selling golf franchise. That's because year after year the company keeps releasing a streamlined, accessible, attractive golf game that's easy to pick out from the store shelves and get running right away in the Windows environment.

No, Microsoft doesn't have the rights to Tiger Woods' likeness. But go figure.

Golf '98 continues the tradition, offering graphical appeal but minimal depth. The course artwork and golfer animations (video-captured—Microsoft hasn't gone to the 3D look yet) are superb, with excellent player customizing. You can tweak your player's characteristics to model their game after your own, setting distance levels and specializing in certain skills like putting or the short game.

However, Microsoft ends up in the rough in several important areas. There's no course designer, which would be forgivable if the game offered more than just four sleepy, uncreative courses (one of which is only nine holes). The resource-hogging is also abominable, with a 245MB typical install; and even with 245 megs the game chugged aggravatingly on a P200. Extras such as tournament play and online tourney structures are also missing, though the game is playable for up to four via LAN and on the Internet Gaming Zone.

There's just so much more to do, see, and feel in competing products like Links LS '98 and Jack Nicklaus 5. And ultimately, their superior ball physics and course management realism are the final deciding points. Golf '98 might be a suitable game to buy your parents if they just got a new PC and are wading into the gaming world, but serious gamers should look elsewhere. —*Daniel Morris*

MICROSOFT GOLF 1998

GAMEPLAY:	C+
GETTING STARTED:	B+
GRAPHICS:	B
MULTIPLAYER:	C+
SOUND CHECK:	B

C+ OVERALL

Attractive, but still off the leader board.

Publisher	Microsoft 800-426-9400
Web	www.microsoft.com/games
Requires	P90, 16MB RAM, 55MB HD, 2MB SVGA, 4x CD-ROM drive
Recommended	P133, 24MB RAM
Street Price	$50

End Game

By Peter Olafson

Your guide to all things [illegible]

I reckon Quake II fans will get a moderate kick out of **The Reckoning**. The first official QII mission pack (designed by Redneck Rampage architect Xatrix) finds you exploring four large "hubs" as you infiltrate a Strogg base. It's challenging even at medium difficulty. Two of its three new weapons are

Quake II: The Reckoning

unique: the Ion Ripper, whose shots can ricochet around corners, and the Trap, which pulls enemies toward it to turn them into power-ups. The secret areas are cleverly concealed (but still within range of mortal minds), and the game uses the destruction of scenery to good effect. The final enemy and the subsequent escape from a collapsing moon-base are nicely wrought. And in places, as on the reactor core and warehouse levels, The Reckoning flirts with the magical properties that define great Quake levels.

I just wish there'd been a few more of those moments, for Reckoning also comes across as a bit generic and predictable—not so much a new spin on Quake II as more of the same. And the animations are a bit low-rent. (Activision; www.activision.com; $30) **B**

Micro Star was quick off the mark in publishing a Starcraft-levels compilation. Maybe a little too quick. The 50-plus missions on **Stellar Forces** are okay individually—after all, Starcraft is fun—but lack memorable detail or a sustaining story. You'd have more fun making them yourself. (Micro Star; www.microstar-usa.com; $20) **C-**

Might and Magic VI Limited Edition is an even better idea than its creators may have known. It's packaged with M&Ms I–V (along with the relatively obscure Swords of Xeen), and the look and feel of these well-regarded RPGs set the stage perfectly for M&M VI's handsome graphics and high body-count. Even if you only play a couple—M&M and M&M III are classics—the consistency of this body of work will make M&M VI feel like a family reunion. (New World Computing; www.3do.com; $55) **B+**

[illegible] exploring thing at the start

All deluxe editions should be this good. **Comanche Gold** includes a spruced-up version of Comanche 3—a notable improvement is smarter wingmen—along with a raft of new missions and the tools to make your own. This action-oriented sim was a game you could finish and never look at again. That's no longer the case. (Nova Logic; www.novalogic.com; $45) **A**

Dungeon Keeper Gold is a fine way for newcomers to get acquainted with Theme Dungeon. You get the parent game, the Deeper Dungeons add-on, the new editor, and the little desktop extras that all publishers tout and nobody uses. Vets looking for extra levels should skip it but not Bullfrog's Web site, which offers some of the extras included here. (Bullfrog; www.ea.com; $40) **A-**

Again with the robots? We need another MechWarrior 2 compilation like a hole in the HUD—but that hasn't stopped Activision from trotting out the clans again with Mercenaries as **The Titanium Trilogy**. The accelerated versions are sharp, but I wasn't even thinking about this after I saw Heavy Gear II. (Activision; www.activision.com; $45) If you own Mech 2 already, it's a **C**; if you don't have it, it's a **B**.

And what possessed Activision to reissue the seven-year-old **Wolfenstein 3D** in a Win 95 version? If it was an attack of historicism, you'd think they'd have bundled in not just the sequel and its add-ons, but also Muse's original Castle Wolfenstein. Instead, you'll find demos of Quake II and Hexen II. (Activision; www.activision.com; $15) **C**

Hexen II? Slowly I turned... it off. After the openness and mystery of the original, I found the sequel wooden and claustrophobic—though beautiful—and didn't expect much from the add-on. So I'm happy to report that the **Portal of Praevus** mission-pack for Hexen II is, well, not much like Hexen II. It's still not quite Hexen—in fact, it has the light feel of Heretic—but it's far more buoyant than the parent game. It picks up right where Hexen II left off, with a new character class (Demoness) and a story set largely in the icy wastes of Tibet. One carryover: It's still gorgeous. (Activision; www.activision.com; $30) **B-**

STRATEGY & TACTICS CHEATS

Cheat codes open up vast new possibilities, encourage the imagination—and they're pretty damn fun. Check out what we've dug up for you this month and let the party begin!

Unreal

Press the Tilde (~) key to bring down the command console, type one of the following, and press Enter.

god: Invincibility.

allammo: Get 999 ammo for all guns.

fly: Fly around.

ghost: Walk through walls.

walk: Turns off flying and ghosting.

killpawns: Kills all monsters.

invisible: Makes you invisible.

slomo [number]: Slows/speeds up the game. (1.0 is normal.)

playersonly: Freezes all non-players. Re-enter code to resume.

behindview x: x = 1 gives you third-person view, x = 0 resets view.

summon [item or weapon]: Adds a weapon or an item (e.g., EIGHTBALL, FLAKCANNON, NALI, DISPERSIONPISTOL, AUTOMAG, STINGER, ASMD, RAZORJACK, GESBIORIFLE, RIFLE, MINIGUN, SKAARJWARRIOR).

open [map name]: Jump to any map (e.g., OPEN DIG).

Single-player maps: Unreal (intro movie), Vortex2, NyLeve, Dig, Dug, Passage, Chizra, Ceremony, Dark, Harobed, TerraLift, Terranium, Noork, Ruins, Trench, IsvKran4, IsvKran32, IsvDeck1, SpireVillage, TheSunspire, SkyCaves, SkyTown, SkyBase, VeloraEnd, Bluff, DasaPass, DasaCellars, NaliBoat, NaliC, NaliLord, Derater, ExtremeBeg, ExtremeLab, ExtremeCore, ExtremeGen, ExtremeDGen, ExtremeDark, ExtremeEnd, QueenEnd, endgame (end movie).

Deathmatch maps: DKNightOp, DMARIZA, DMCURSE, DmDeathFan, DmDeck16, DMElsinore, Dmfith, DmHealPod, DmMorbias, DmRadikus, DmTundra.

Dark Omen

Type these codes at the main screen to warp to specific missions:

thelivinggem

handyman

ridethestorm

youandi

Cyberstorm 1

Edit your STORM.INI file in your Cyberstorm directory and add these codes to it, which will add corresponding menu items you can use during the game. Add each code onto a new line by itself, remembering to save the file when finished. This list shows the menu functions that can be added (and what code will activate that function).

While at HereBase, you can now choose:

I'll Buy That For A Credit: Get 1 credit.

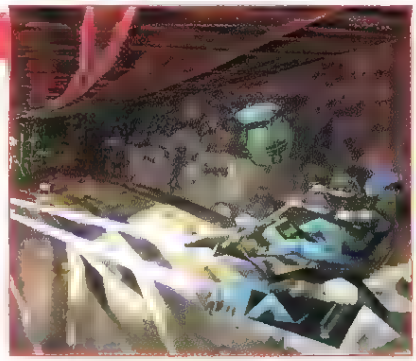
During battle, you can now select:

Tarsus: Heal selected pilots.

It's just a flesh wound: Repair selected vehicles.

Did I break your concentration: Touch o' Death (one).

Forsaken



Type in any menu:

bubbles: Enables cheats.

thefullmonty: Activates level-switch capability; use menus to pick any level.

iamzeus: Invulnerability, full weapons, unlimited ammo and nitro, four powerpods, two unknown weapons (SPID and THIEF eyeballs).

titsoot: If you have access to the special ship, turns on the "adult" textures.

lumberjack: Activates a missile toggle. Hitting quick key for Mug selects normal; hit again for spiraling Mug; hit again for bouncy Mug. Hitting quick key for Solaris selects normal; hit again for homing plasma; hit again for extra-powerful blue homing plasma.

jimbeam: Activates the beam toggle. Hitting laser quick-key selects normal laser; hit again for electro-beam; hit again for "superbeam from Hades."

MechCommander

Create a file in DOS mode called "buymechcommander.2" and put it in the directory where you installed MechCommander. Now, during the game, type in these codes and press Enter:

osmiu: Toggle invincibility on/off.

lorrie: Refill your ammo.

World Cup 98

Go to Customize Player and enter these names. If entered correctly, there will be a confirmation noise. Now go back to Match Select and press Scroll Lock to bring up the Cheats menu. Select the cheats you want to activate. (Note: Many of them can be combined for some bizarre effects.)

Zico: Enable 1982 classic match.

Hurst: Enable 1982, 1974, 1970, and 1966 classic matches.

Kenny: Flaming ball.

Gabo: Big heads.

Kyle: Skeleton players.

Cartman: Take a dive.

Gonzo: Hot potato.

Mr Hat: Crazy ball.

Powder: Silly moves.

Neila: Alien mode.

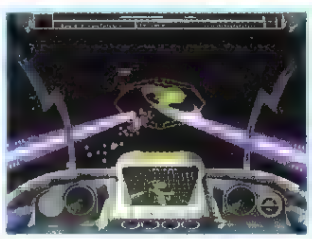
Monster Truck Madness 2

To access the hidden track, choose the Sidewinder Canyon track. Drive past checkpoint 4, around the corner and over the bridge. You'll see barricades to the right side—drive through them. Drive across the bridge that intersects the road/bridge you are on and through the archway labeled "The Pit."

To play hockey on the Breakneck Ridge track, set the weather to snow, and the puck will pop up in the water area, which is now ice.

Also, most tracks have numerous shortcuts. Setting the skill level to Professional and following the computer trucks will reveal many of these.

X-COM: Interceptor



During the game, before you get into battle, press **Ctrl-e**. *You'll hear a low double-beep; type in these codes and press Enter. (Note: You'll need to type* **battlecheat** *before using the* **canttouchthis** *code.)*

canttouchthis: Invincibility.

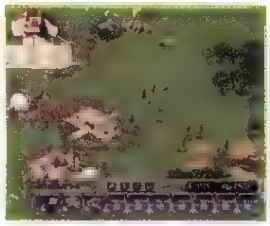
fillerup: Unlimited flight range.

payday: Money.

knowitall: All research.

quickbase: Finishes all bases currently under construction.

Dominion



During the game, press Enter, then type in these codes and hit Enter again:

lushee: Increases resources.

infrared: Reveals map.

combustion: Kills enemy units.

zipper: Speed-build (computer also benefits from this code).

Comanche Gold

Hit r for radio message, then type the following cheats. (Note: Caps Lock must be off for cheats to work. Also, using them will zero your score for the mission.)

fixme: Fix damage.

pigsoink: Max out on weapons.

imacow: Freeze time for 60 seconds.

imarat: Become invisible for 60 seconds.

harmony: Add GPS hellfires to your loadout.

loadme: Reload.

cheat=mercenary or **6969:** Turn enemies into mercenaries (they kill each other).

These codes don't count as cheating:

die team mate! or **x666:** Will cause your teammate to blow up.

Army Men

Press Esc and type:

Triumph: Win the scenario.

Succumb: Lose the scenario.

Omniscient: Toggle between your view and omniscient view of all troops.

Kahuna: Add explosions, omniscient view, and invulnerability.

Pyromancer: Toggle right-button explosion.

Aeroballistics: Gives you full air-support.

Invulnerable: Makes Sarge invulnerable.

Paralysis: Pins foes in place.

Telekinetic: Teleport Sarge anywhere in the world (get into scroll mode first and scroll where you want to go).

Plethora: Full ammo.

Occultation: Stealth mode (Sarge won't be spotted unless he shoots).

Game Sound: The Latest Wave

By George T. Chronis and Danny W. Lam

There once was a titanic struggle between Creative's Sound Blaster cards and everything else. Wave after wave of would-be challengers sent their best—and worst—ISA-bus champions into computer stores, only to be vanquished by gamers who rallied their dollars around the reliability of the Sound Blaster standard. When the dust settled several years ago, the AWE32 sound card emerged triumphant and unchallenged—a reign that would be passed on to the AWE64 a year later.

But as every gamer knows, the vanquished always rise again.

With half of 1998 already behind us, ISA sound cards are being swept away by a rush to the plug-and-play goodness of the PCI bus, as well as by an impudent upstart named Aureal that has championed 3D audio. Both trends have chipped away at Creative's Sound Blaster fortress—giving gamers reason to look elsewhere for their sound cards.

To help you better understand the sometimes confusing claims and choices out there, *PC Games* took a look at the latest crop of sound cards. You'll notice that Creative isn't represented. True, we reviewed the AWE64 more than a year ago, but what about the new Sound Blaster PCI64 card? Since it's actually a reworked product that Creative inherited during the buy-out of Ensoniq last year, Creative decided not to send out units for review. You can draw whatever conclusions you wish, but Creative is gearing up for the release of its Environmental Audio package, which includes a PCI sound card as well as a special set of speakers produced by Cambridge SoundWorks. Environmental Audio is Creative's return volley to Aureal's A3D, a technology providing surround and positional sound with just two speakers. The difference is, Creative's attempting to cut A3D off at the knees by lobbying Microsoft hard to include Creative 3D-sound protocols in DirectX 6.1. So, until we can have a look at Environmental Audio, here's the state of the art in game sound today.

Starfleet Academy sounded better with the A3DXstream than with the Predator 3D.

Predator 3D

RATING: B-

For more than a year now, we've been deluged by sales pitches from Aureal about how much better off gamers are with PCI audio cards and booming A3D positional sound effects. The theory goes that PCI audio cards don't slow down CPUs anywhere near as much as the old ISA variety. Then Shark dropped its ISA-based Predator 3D audio card on my desk, and all I could do was scratch my head. "Isn't this an oxymoron?" I asked.

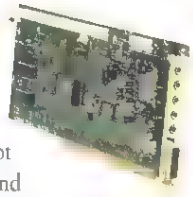
To my surprise, the answer is "Not always." Although my snobbish skepticism was high, I couldn't ignore the Compaq P150 that served as the upgrade test-bed in the July/August issue of *PC Games*. The problem was that the P150 only had two available PCI slots, so no nifty Monster Sound M80 for that PC. Shark did an excellent job of beefing up the chipset on the board to place the least possible amount of strain on the CPU. In this case, we were working with an Intel Overdrive P180, which was up to the call of duty.

In real terms, the Predator can pump out seven distinct 3D audio streams compared to the original Monster Sound's eight 3D streams. Both boards use Aureal's A3D protocols. With the Compaq, I found the Predator was just as good at presenting Jedi Knight's and Starfleet Academy's made-for-A3D sound effects as the Monster Sound in my P200. If there was an ISA performance penalty, I couldn't perceive it. What's more, the Predator's standard joystick port was completely compatible with every joystick I threw at it. That's something I couldn't say about the digital port on the Monster Sound.

So if you're stuck with no available PCI slots and want 3D audio, I highly recommend the Predator 3D. (Shark Multimedia; 800-800-3321; www.sharkmm.com; street $79) —*GTC*

Maxi Sound Game Theater 64

RATING: B+



Ponder true four-channel, four-speaker quadraphonic stereo. That's what Guillemot has given us in the Maxi Sound Game Theater 64: Dynamic 3D Edition.

Based on the Dream 9407 RISC-based 50 MIPS DSP, it boasts 64-voice wavetable synthesis, support for DirectSound 3D, full compatibility with DOS applications, and programmable surround-sound, all for $99.

You'll hear Turok 2's Deathguard gunnin' for you in crisp A3D.

Niceties include a slot that takes 72-pin memory (60ns EDO) for upgrading the standard 2MB up to 64MB, an amplified output perfect for headsets, and a MIDI sequencer. Make sure your front and back speakers are powered, and you're in business.

As for 3D audio, there's no support for QSound or A3D, which make two speakers sound like four, providing you're sitting between them. The GT64 uses Microsoft's DirectSound to work with four separate speakers/channels, so the sound comes through no matter where you're sitting. The effect is definitely more realistic.

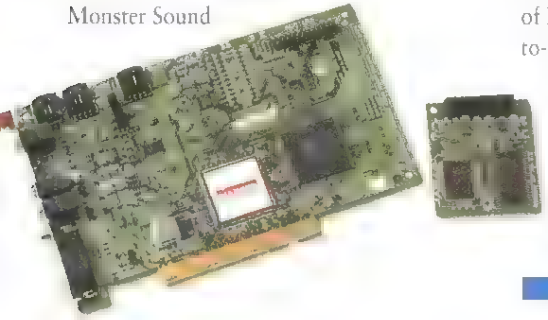
Using the Maxi FX software, you can set the DSP to emulate effects like reverb and echo for your programs, and it comes with a list of profiles for a number of games, including Starcraft, C&C, and others. The Maxi Bank Downloader lets you grab new profiles right off Guillemot's Web site. Where the GI guys goofed was in putting the joystick output so close to the output for powered speakers. In the fight for space, my speaker plug lost and is now resting at an angle, while the ThrustMaster joystick connector is snugly in place.

For $99, you can't beat the features in the GT64, and its performance is commendable. Although this isn't a PCI card (like the A3DXstream), the sound it produces is so beautiful and distinct, who cares! If you've got an open ISA slot, a limited budget, and an extra pair of speakers, then this is the card to get. (Guillemot; 800-967-0863; www.guillemot.com; street $99) —*DWI*

Monster Sound M80

RATING: B

Diamond Multimedia isn't sitting on its 3D-audio laurels. Last year, the company was first on the block to implement Aureal's A3D technology into its add-on Monster Sound board. Sensing that gamers are ready to ditch their old ISA sound cards entirely, Diamond has whipped up its stand-alone, PCI-based Monster Sound M80.



While you could run the Monster Sound board by itself, the Sound Blaster support wasn't the best, and there were definite joystick-compatibility problems with the digital game port. Those issues have been fixed with the M80, including a wave synthesis module that better matches the output quality of Guillemot's and Creative's ISA boards. The Sound Blaster emulation is great as long as you run DOS games in a Win 95 window. But if you run older games in straight DOS, the M80 needs to run as an add-on to an existing ISA sound card. In Win 95, the M80 also has full API support for DirectSound, DirectSound 3D, DirectInput, and Aureal's A3D.

After testing the M80 with Jedi Knight, which natively supports A3D, I have to say the effect is impressive. A laser shot coming from the left rear was distinctly different from a shot from the right rear (though the ones coming from above took some getting used to). This Monster was definitely doing its job. I also tried Heavy Gear, which—while it doesn't implement A3D as fully as Jedi Knight—sounded great as well. Other games using A3D include Mageslayer, SimCopter, and Starfleet Academy; and upcoming games that'll support it include MechWarrior 3 and Turok 2: Seeds of Evil (check out **www.a3d.com** for an up-to-date list).

If you're looking for a new sound card and have a PCI slot open, don't hesitate to put the M80 on your list. (Diamond Multimedia; 800-380-0030; www.diamondmm.com; street $99) —*DWI.*

SonicStorm

RATING: C+

SonicStorm may sound like a combo move in a fighting game, but it's actually the first sound card from VideoLogic, best known for its PowerVR 3D accelerators. Based on the ESS Maestro-1 chip, this card boasts 64-voice wavetable synthesis and 3D audio positioning capabilities.

VideoLogic licensed the 3D standard from Qsound instead of getting Aureal's A3D. The SonicStorm does have its own interpretation of the A3D API—just don't expect the same results you'd get from a fully supported A3D card.

The SonicStorm takes advantage of the PCI bus' faster data-channel, which is less CPU-dependent than an ISA slot. This can relieve some of the pressure on your main CPU, freeing it up for other tasks. Many gamers don't realize that high-end sound can use a lot of system resources if an ISA sound card is being used.

The SonicStorm works best with Qsound-compatible games like Formula 1.

What does all this mean in terms of gaming? I stuck the SonicStorm into a P75 (the minimum requirement for this card), and I discovered G Police was noticeably faster than with my original ISA sound card.

G Police is a Qsound-compatible game—one of several, including Formula 1. While holding my position in midair, I was pounded by enemy fire (because I let them, of course...), and the SonicStorm let me know just where the shots were coming from: top, bottom, left...well, you get the idea.

I also booted up Jedi Knight. In fairness, Jedi was coded specifically to take advantage of A3D, not QSound's 3D audio. While the SonicStorm did a good job of differentiat-

ing between left and right sound sources here, it was definitely not as immersive an experience as the one the Monster Sound M80 delivered.

Still, the SonicStorm is a solid card that features Sound Blaster support for all your DOS/Win 95 games, as well as for DirectSound and DirectSound3D. The one drawback is that most 3D audio games are being developed for Aureal's A3D, which the SonicStorm doesn't do so well at emulating. (VideoLogic; www.videologic.com; street $89) —*DWL*

Montego A3DXstream

RATING: A

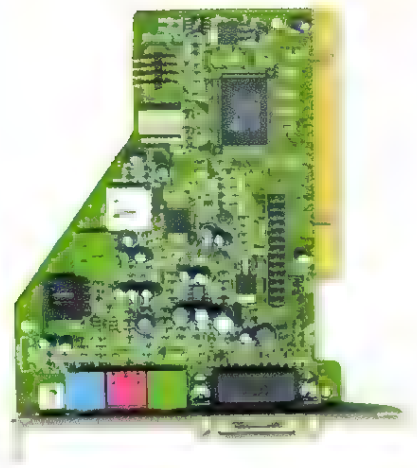
My experiences over the years with Turtle Beach audio cards were almost never glitch-free where IRQ conflicts or MIDI support were concerned. So I viewed the arrival of the new Montego A3DXstream PCI audio card with a bit of trepidation. Given my low expectations, this card surprised the hell out of me.

Considering the changes in audio cards the last couple of years, the fact that A3DXstream uses both PCI and Aureal's A3D makes it state-of-the-art. The card's based on Aureal's Vortex chipset—the first retail example we've seen to date—and it really pumps out beautiful sound.

Unlike Diamond's Monster Sound, which manages eight 3D audio streams at the expense of no 2D audio streams, the Vortex chipset can push eight 3D *and* eight 2D streams at the same time. Why is that important? Because if a game has 2D audio, it'll pull streams from the 3D side in pre-Vortex A3D cards.

What's this eight stream capability mean? With Jedi Knight and Starfleet Academy, the A3DXstream delivered the most dynamic positional effects of any A3D card we've tested to date.

For those of you still worried about DOS compatibility, I booted up Redneck Rampage Rides Again in DOS, and the A3DXstream handled it just fine.



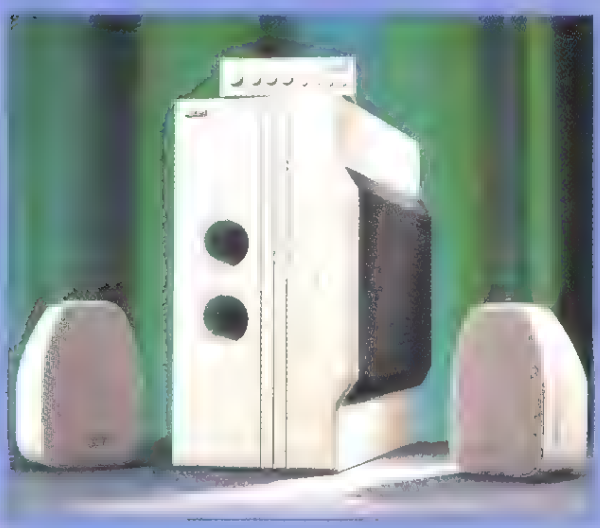
Redbook and MIDI audio also sounded great through the A3DXstream—that's important when you're listening to the sweeping movie themes in Jedi and Starfleet. The card supports 64-voice wavetable synthesis and MPU-401 MIDI. As for ports, the joystick port worked with every stick I threw at it. Unlike most audio cards, which have only two internal audio connectors, the A3DXstream adds a third port for those of you with DVD drives.

If you have a PCI slot available and want to step up to 3D audio, the A3DXstream is an affordable card that delivers the best positional audio around. (Turtle Beach; 800-233-9377; www.tbeach.com; street $99) —*GTC*

S2/MidiLand 4100

RATING: A+

I'm as sick as you are of the term "rocks" being used to describe how fantastic something is. But there's simply no other word that describes the S2/MidiLand 4100 speaker system adequately. This high-end, four-component audio system not only rocks, it literally rocks the house.



The heart of the 4100 is a massive subwoofer that houses a beefy, 100-watt, three-channel amplifier that emits a deep, rumblin' bass that had the blinds on the windows in my computer room shaking—at only 20 percent volume. The subwoofer connects to two satellite speakers that pump out 25 watts of ear damage each. The fourth piece of the system is a control module you can house inside a standard 5.25-inch drive bay or affix to your desktop or monitor. This module offers separate bass, treble, balance, and volume dials, as well as 3D audio, mute, loudness, and input buttons.

How's the 4100 sound? Awesome. It not only delivers with games, but it also literally turns your PC into a full-fledged home stereo—able to handle with aplomb any type of music CD you care to throw at it. Even the proprietary 3DSP circuitry—which basically emulates a five-speaker, surround-sound effect—is impressive, especially with 3D action games such as Quake II and Jedi Knight.

The icing on the cake is that nearly every cord/cable/extra you can think of is included in the box: There's no need to run out to Radio Shack to pick up special patch cords or cables just to get the 4100 working properly. That may sound obvious, but I'm continually surprised at how many companies drop the ball in this regard.

If you're a gamer and/or an audiophile, you can't go wrong with the 4100. Considering its quality construction, performance, and features, it's even reasonably priced. (MidiLand; 909-592-1168; www.midiland.com; street $350) —*Steve Klett*

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The New Modem Lineup

By the *PC Games* Staff

Sort of like what parity did to the NFL, finding a modem that stands above the competition is pretty hard these days. As gamers, we're constantly looking for modems that will push data packets just a bit faster to make playing Quake II more satisfying—and 56K modems are a good option. If you're thinking about upgrading to a K56flex modem, here are four recent draft choices to consider.

SupraExpress 56

RATING: A

If you play any action games at all online, you owe it to yourself to check out Diamond's SupraExpress 56.

As its name suggests, this puppy supports data-transmission speeds of up to 56Kbps through both the V.90 and K56flex standard protocols—and this means it's fast. It's also one of the new PCI modems that'll support telephony features in Win 98 without causing a wealth of IRQ conflicts that ISA cards are known for.

I had Diamond's SupraExpress 33.6 internal modem installed in my P200 at home and couldn't find a Quake II game on the Internet with a ping time below 300 milliseconds. I popped in the SupraExpress 56, and within five minutes I had instantly cut my QII ping times in half!

My Supra's average connection speeds from home consistently ranged from 38.8Kbps to 44Kbps. Working from a dedicated 56Kflex line closer to work, connection times between 44Kbps and 48Kbps were the norm.

Diamond also makes a highly compact external version that comes with its own built-in serial cable. For those of you lacking PCI slots but who have an open serial port, the external is a great alternative that turned in exactly the same connection speeds. (Diamond Multimedia; 800-727-8772; www.diamondmm.com; street $99)

—*Steve Klett*

The leap to 56K technology can cut your ping times in half.

ActionTec 56K

RATING: C+

Out of the box, the ActionTec 56K looks pretty. Its case is of traditional size for externals, although now most other modem makers are putting out designs half the size. Unfortunately, you can't put its big footprint to use because the raised heat-vent on top makes it difficult to stack other components on it.

I was willing to ignore the inconvenience because this modem connected at 50Kbps the first time I dialed out to my ISP. In fact, the ActionTec routinely connected at 50Kbps and at no less than 48Kbps through the three ISPs I tried it with. Every other K56flex modem I've used connected at 44Kbps or 46Kbps. Once it connected, the ActionTec's stability against line spikes and time-outs was admirable.

The problem is that getting connected is a trial—with a one-in-five chance of success. Sometimes the modem will sit there doing nothing. Other times, it'll open a dial tone but not dial, or fail to open a dial tone but dial anyway. This wasn't a problem with the other K56flex modems I've tested with this installation of Win 95.

If your ISP and online-game service are stable and you plan to stay connected for long periods of time, the ActionTec may be worth it to you for the extra speed. (ActionTec; 800-797-7001; www.actiontec.com; street $99)

—*George T. Chronis*

MultiModem DSVD

RATING: B

There are lots of companies making high-quality modems for computer makers—and now many are marketing their products separately. That's the case with the MultiModem DSVD.

This external modem is almost as compact as Diamond's new external SupraExpress, but with a more traditional case. Where the SupraExpress' sloping top makes it impossible to stack any other components on top of it, the MultiModem is very happy serving as a base for my left PC-speaker.

In the performance department, the MultiModem turns in connection times right in the middle of the pack. Like the SupraExpress, it usually connected at 46Kbps to the three ISPs I tried it with. Every so often I was blessed with 48Kbps, but those occasions were rare. Where reliability is concerned, the MultiModem and its drivers always handled connections easily, and this modem maintained stable connections for sessions as long as six hours—very important if you're a Total Annihilation or Starcraft fanatic.

For reliability at a decent price, this is a product you can trust. (MultiTech; 800-328 9717; www.multitech.com; street $99)—*GTC*

Aztech 56K PCI Modem

RATING: A-

By the end of this year, most new PCs will use PCI slots exclusively, with an AGP slot thrown in for good measure—thanks to Microsoft's new PC98 system specification. So say goodbye to your old ISA-based modems and hello to the likes of Aztech's 56K PCI modem.

Aztech is one of the first arrivals in this all-PCI transition. Its modem is flash-upgradable to the new ITU 56K standard (V.90). So, what does PCI do better than ISA? At least as far as connections go, not much. We were able to make fast, consistent connections in the range of 45Kbps to 50Kbps on our test phone-line. What we did notice, subjectively at least, was that connections were established slightly faster than with ISA-based modems. Unlike sound cards, PCI doesn't free up much in the way of CPU resources where modems are concerned.

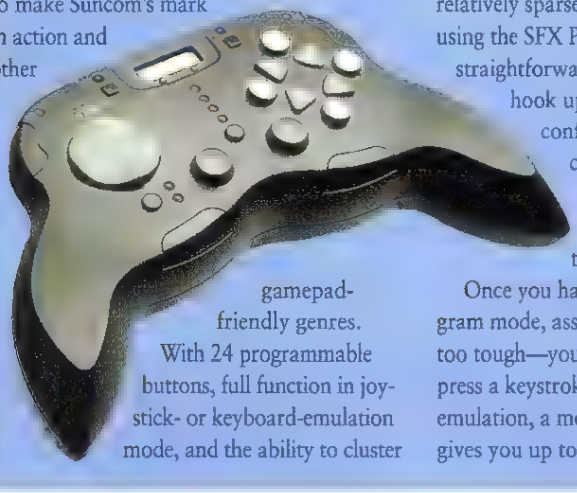
The Aztech PCI is a solid, well-priced modem for those who need a new modem today and are certain they will upgrade to a PC98 system when they become available. Until then, however, PCI slots tend to be a relatively precious commodity in high-end gaming systems. And for now, the PCI modem won't do anything a comparable ISA-based modem can't do just as well. (Aztech; 800-886-8859; www.aztechca.com; street $89)

—David Gerding

SFX Plus

RATING: B+

Call it the legacy of a misplaced childhood, but I really like gamepads. Suncom's SFX Plus, a new offering from the folks who brought us the likes of the F-15E–style joysticks for serious flight-sim flyers, is a bid to make Suncom's mark in action and other gamepad-friendly genres.



With 24 programmable buttons, full function in joystick- or keyboard-emulation mode, and the ability to cluster more than one keyboard stroke on a button, this is a serious endeavor. It's a lot to contemplate, but if you like pads from your days on the console (which you've given up, right?) and can wrap your brain around that much configurability, you'll like the SFX Plus.

Setting up these button options is a rigorous process, not helped much by the relatively sparse directions for installing and using the SFX Plus. The install routine was straightforward (plug into the game port, hook up the keyboard dongle, and configure at the game-controller control panel) but glitchy. It took a few shots before it would calibrate the directional pad.

Once you have the knack of entering program mode, assigning joystick buttons isn't too tough—you simply hold a button, then press a keystroke or combo. In keyboard emulation, a most-welcome macro mode gives you up to six keystrokes for a button, a superb way to automate sequential tasks. You can also assign simultaneous keystrokes. Most games will let you program from the game menu—I had no trouble using the Quake II options to set up my pad. Your eight-way D-pad, eight fire-buttons, two hat-switches, and four grip-triggers give you plenty of options for assignments, too.

One attractive aspect of the SFX Plus is the feel of the pad, which won't surprise aficionados of Suncom's sturdy joysticks. The flared grips give you a better hold on the pad than, say, the original SFX gamepad or its SideWinder or Gravis competitors. The button setup is quite comfortable, too: for the average hand, everything is pretty much where it should be. There's even an onboard alarm clock that'll let you know when it's 2:30 a.m. and time to quit your game. You'll ignore it, of course. (Suncom; 847-229-0002; www.suncominc.com; street $49)

—Don St. John

ViewSonic G790

RATING: A

I'd had enough of big-screen envy—coming home to play every night on a smaller monitor than I have in the *PC Games* office just wasn't cutting it. But I thought a 19-inch CRT would be out of the question unless I invested in a new computer table. That was until ViewSonic blessed us with its short-backed G790.

The G790 features a tube made of super-contrast glass that boosts bright, bold colors, as well as ViewSonic's standard shadow-masking treatment favored by graphic artists for display sharpness. The dot pitch is rated at a respectable .26, and maximum resolution is 1,600-by-1,280 at an 88Hz refresh rate. Installation was a breeze using driver files downloadable from ViewSonic's Web site.

Despite the awesome specs, I was skeptical that the new ViewSonic would fit on my modest tabletop at home. But sure enough, at 18.3 inches deep and 17.7 inches wide, the G790 fit in the same space as the 17-inch. Then I turned the G790 on. Gadzooks! That big, flat, square tube turned out exceptionally clear and colorful images that took my breath away. Explosions in Incoming are beautiful on almost every monitor, but on the G790 they seemed somewhat richer than on the Sonys, NECs, and older ViewSonics I'm used to. And in Battlezone, the Mars vistas are far more majestic on this ViewSonic.

The $845 street price is still a bit pricey for most gamers. But if you need a 19-inch monitor to fit a 17-inch space and can pony up the cash, the G790 makes games look exceptional. (ViewSonic; 800-888-8583; www.viewsonic.com; street $845) —*George T. Chronis*

Optiquest V95

RATING: A-

I thought I'd never tire of my trusty .26-pitch, 17-inch Nokia monitor. But then along came the Optiquest V95, and suddenly the Nokia's collecting dust in a corner.

Sure, the lure of bigger monitors has always been strong, but big-screen CRTs usually couldn't provide the same corner-to-corner sharp images as my trusty Nokia, and the darn monsters were just too huge. But the V95 made me sit up and take notice.

The latest in the Optiquest line of "affordable" monitors, the V95 sports a 19-inch (18-inch viewable) display with a .26mm dot pitch. It delivers an amazingly sharp picture, supporting resolutions up to 1,600-by-1,280 and refresh rates up to 88Hz at 1,280-by-1,024 resolution.

The screen is slightly rounded—not enough to result in the classic "fishbowl" effect—but it still manages to deliver a clear image out to the edges at all resolutions. Playing 3D-accelerated Quake II in 800-by-600 res on this baby is gaming nirvana. Jedi, Total Annihilation, and Starcraft—all are much better at this size.

For a 19-inch monitor, the Optiquest V95 is as nicely compact and light as a 17-inch monitor, adding to the appeal of its $799 price tag. That may seem like a lot of dough, but it's significantly less than many other monitors offering similar features—and hey, you get a three-year warranty. (Optiquest; 800-888-8583; www.optiquest.com; street $799) —*Steve Klett*

Vortex 3D

RATING: C+

Interact's 17-button Vortex 3D is hopping on the all-in-one bandwagon, providing a gamepad that rests on a joystick trunk and can be used as a flight controller, steering wheel, or detachable gamepad. Accessing the diversity of the Vortex 3D, however, requires having to change the joystick driver every time you want to use it with a different type of game. In theory, this beats hardwiring a new controller and resetting drivers for each new game. Unfortunately, you also have to toggle switches on the Vortex as well as changing joystick drivers. And the button-mapping software is primitive.

But as a joystick, the Vortex 3D works really well with Microsoft's Flight Simulator 98. The throttle switch provided just enough resistance during flight. For the most part, tilting the gamepad on the axis was adequate for controlling the trajectory of the aircraft. The only problem I had was when I went into too steep a dive and tried to pull up hard on the plane. The gamepad slipped off its perch, forcing me to watch the inevitable crash helplessly.

I took the Vortex 3D for a test spin with Sega's Touring Car Championship. It took a bit of tweaking to get the right driving settings, but after the acceleration and shifting configuration was nailed down, I found that the Vortex makes a great steering wheel. The well-designed base provides excellent under-the-leg driving support.

As a gamepad, the Vortex was less than appealing. The buttons are aptly located, but the gamepad is almost too heavy to use comfortably without resting it on a desktop or your lap.

This isn't the device that's going to replace all your other peripherals. If you're a flight-sim dude or a hardcore NASCAR slut, it probably won't meet your needs. But if you don't have a separate gamepad, joystick, and wheel, this all-in-one will do until you find your niche. (Interact; 800-732-6866; www.interact-acc.com; street $50) —*Joel Strauch*

DirectX 6.0 Targets Your PC

By George T. Chronis

By the time you read this, Microsoft should have released its latest version of DirectX, version 6.0. But don't expect to find it in Win 98: The latest Windows shipped with DirectX 5.0. That's a shame, because DX6 is the upgrade gamers really need—it's free and full of tangible enhancements for running 3D games in Win 95.

DX6's goodies can be broken down into two categories. Phase one in DX6 will include CPU and 3D-performance tweaks. Then, possibly by year's end, Microsoft will release DX6.1, which will include a broad assault on sound and positional-audio playback standards.

CPUs

Gamers use a variety of CPUs in their computers. Classic Pentiums, Pentium MMXs, Pentium IIs, and K6s are already common. Soon AMD's K6-2 and K6-Plus, as well as Intel's Celeron, will be powering game PCs. Each of those processors has different characteristics and performance windows. Some rely on 66MHz motherboards, while the newer CPUs are designed for 100MHz motherboards. DX6 adds extra instructions to the API, permitting developers to make games that recognize what CPU is in your computer and then optimize the game for that chip. For example, if you buy a K6-2 CPU that features enhanced FPU (floating point unit) performance, you won't get the full benefit of that FPU boost unless you upgrade to DX6.

3D Performance

DirectX and its Direct3D protocols have gotten a bloody nose in the past for not being the most efficient way to bring 3D to the masses. Microsoft has listened, working to make DX6 a better performer. Here are the highlights: The guts of DX6 are six times smaller than DX5's, and the remaining code has been optimized to handle a broader range of 3D functions. Microsoft claims this reduction and optimization will improve stability and speed. DX6 will also supposedly increase the number of D3D features available to most D3D accelerators. When 3D video-card makers talk about DX6 compatibility, this is what they're referring to.

Other changes include how D3D caches geometry. Using a better buffering technique, D3D can more efficiently recognize and cache 3D geometry in system memory, video memory, or AGP memory. Microsoft has made programming in D3D more flexible, so now multiple textures can be rendered on the same 3D polygon in one pass—meaning more 3D visual depth can be put on your monitor in less time.

3D Audio

Just as 3Dfx's Glide broke open the gaming world for 3D graphics—forcing Microsoft to play catch-up with Direct3D—in the last 18 months Aureal has made 3D positional audio part of the computer-gaming experience. In this case, Microsoft's pinch-hitters are the DirectSound protocol that will ship with DX6.1 as well as the Sound Blaster crew at Creative.

Rather than go head to head with Aureal in a protocol war, Creative is working with Microsoft to include its own Environmental Audio 3D standard within DirectSound. Getting its 3D standard fast-tracked everywhere DX6.1 is installed is a coup: every DirectSound-compatible sound card would be using Creative's protocols. And Creative's better experience with those protocols should make it easier to develop Sound Blaster 3D audio features first.

DirectMusic

Also slated for DX6.1 is DirectMusic, Microsoft's grand plan to bring MIDI back as a viable music format in games. MIDI used to be a problem because it seemed no two sound cards handled MIDI tracks in the same way—or at all. That's why Redbook audio became popular: game designers knew that the music would sound the same on every PC. Unfortunately, Windows can't access a CD when it's playing Redbook audio, so game installations have exploded as every sound is copied to the hard drive. Since MIDI takes up much less space and allows for CD access, Microsoft wants to make a better MIDI that can also adapt to player actions—something Redbook can't do.

Microsoft is working on a high-quality MIDI sequencer, which should standardize playback on DX6.1-compatible sound cards with wave-table synthesis. When wave-table synthesizers are absent, DirectSound will substitute its own software synthesizer, which supports all of the MIDI features mentioned above. Microsoft claims CPU overhead will be minor—we'll see. And if game designers code their titles to instruct DirectMusic how to react to player input, the MIDI scores will adapt to events in the game.

Get It

Although updating DirectX is never anxiety free, DX6 and DX6.1 have so many performance enhancements, gamers would be daft not to install these upgrades when they become available at **www.microsoft.com/directx/resources/default.asp**

TECHNOBABBLE S.O.S.

Slow screens and upgrade dreams

By Patrick Marshall

Q A friend of mine told me that I could overclock my P150 (non-MMX) to a P166 by setting the motherboard jumpers to 66MHz clock speed. I did this, and the system booted as a P166. Are there any drawbacks to what I've done?

Robert Kesslick, via email

A *The most obvious drawback is that you've voided the warranty on your processor. The P150 chip may work just fine running at the higher clock speed...or it may not. It depends primarily on the motherboard you're using and how well the mainboard chipsets support the change. But every CPU is rated to draw a specific amount of current and produce a certain amount of heat. Overclocking can boost performance, but it can also go wrong if either the motherboard or CPU isn't happy with the wattage settings or heat produced. You run the risk of shortening the life of your processor.*

Q I have games such as Command & Conquer and Jedi Knight, and they both have cut-scenes. My problem is that they look like old Japanese movies (the actors' mouths move and a second later the words come out). Plus, the music skips. I have 48MB of RAM, a 133MHz processor, and a 6x CD-ROM drive. I'm planning to invest in a Monster 3D II. Will that reduce the problem?

Steve, via email

A *Well, you don't say what 2D/3D graphics adapter you're using now, so it's hard to estimate just how much moving to the Monster 3D II will help, since cut-scenes generally are not 3D-rendered. Bear in mind, however, that a number of other factors also influence video playback, including the amount of VRAM on your video card, the RAM on your motherboard, the speed of your processor, what type of bus your computer uses, and even the versions of the operating system and drivers you're using. Your 6x (probably IDE) CD-ROM drive could be part of the problem, given that your CPU has to stop doing other things in order to manage the transfer data from the CD-ROM. A faster processor would*

be better able to handle the strain. Then again, a faster EIDE CD-ROM drive would create less of a strain on your P133. And keep in mind that the performance gains from a Voodoo II only really come into play in Pentium II systems, so you won't get much help there.

Send S.O.S. questions to *sos@pcgames.com*.

HARDWARE HALL OF FAME

Wondering what hardware to buy to get the best game machine for your money? It's easy: just check *PC Games*' running list of our top hardware recommendations. Each month, we'll update the Hall of Fame as we review new products.

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Monitor	ViewSonic G790 19-inch	ViewSonic; 800-888-8583; approx. $845	A
CD-ROM drive	Sony CDU-711 32x	Sony Corp; 800-476-6972; approx. $99	A-
Sound card	AWE64	Creative Labs; 800-998-5227; $129	A
Speakers	ACS55 Power Gaming System	Altec Lansing; 800-258-3288; approx. $150	A
Joystick	F-16 Combatstick	CH Products; 760-598-2518; $70	A+
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Modem	SupraExpress 56	Diamond; 800-727-8772; approx. $99	A
SVGA card	Stealth 3D 2000 Pro	Diamond; 800-727-8772; approx. $160	A
2D/3D video card	Velocity 128V	STB; 800-234-4334; approx $175	A
Key add-ons	Pure3D video accelerator	Canopus; 888-868-2533; approx. $165	A
	Monster Sound M80	Diamond; 800-727-8772; approx. $199	A

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FACE-OFF

Gomab
Snipe

Is Real-Time Strategy Dead?

Can a genre become creatively bankrupt? You don't see too many westerns or musicals coming out of Hollywood these days, and there's a festering cell of gamers who are beginning to believe that real-time strategy has been done to death. Gomab jumps up and down on the RTS grave in belligerent **bold**, while Snipe takes to defensive positions in well-fortified *italics*.

RTSs are a waste of my time and money. I've already done it all before. You can't show me one new Command & Conquer clone with any originality in design or gameplay. It's all old news. Why bother? The RTS is dead.

You can't tell me you won't be with the rest of us lining up to play C&C: Tiberian Sun or Force Commander or Dark Reign II. The genre is expanding into new 3D territory, with AI and control options we could only dream about before—like Dominion's bridges and its engineers' capabilities. Sure, we've suffered through more than our fair share of clones such as Conquest Earth, War Inc., and 7th Legion, but the RTS is dynamic enough to take us to better gameplay.

No, you miss my point. Strategy games are no longer strategy games—they're turning into action games. I mean, look at the most recent hits like Battlezone, Uprising, and even games like Armor Command: They're all more action than strategy. There are no great new RTS games because the genre died from C&C overkill.

Oh, please! You'll go out and buy every annual update to Madden or NHL without a second thought. And the games you mentioned are intentionally incorporating action and RTS elements. There are several innovative, pure RTSs in the works—Tiberian Sun, Force Commander.

True, I'd purchase the latest and greatest sports updates each year for their new features, graphics, and gameplay. But what do you get when you buy Tiberian Sun or Force Commander? The same game with nice 3D graphics and different-looking units that do the same thing in the same way. In sports games, I get actual player stats and team histories that make every update different in terms of gameplay. In every new real-time strategy game, you build, you bum rush, you win. That's why real-time strategy games are becoming action games. Yes, you build, you attack—but is that action really any different from RTS game to RTS game? The strategy is gone. B-o-r-i-n-g!

The strategy is there if you're game enough to stick with RTSs for more than two weeks. I've used dozens of strategies in Total Annihilation—Flash rush, air domination, Commander rush, Commander kidnap, Commander bomb, nukes, Bertha shelling...and that's just the popular scenarios. People are coming up with new strategies all the time. The strategy all comes from the human element. If you're having boring experiences, I'll bet you're playing boring people.

Okay, but you're saying the same thing: "You build, you attack, you win." I mean, if this genre's so great, why would they be diluting it by making strategy/action hybrids? How many real-time strategy games were there this year? I think there were over 35. So, how many damn ways can I build and attack? This is a boring experience no matter who I'm playing or how many different ways I play it.

Oh, and I suppose "You run, you kick, you miss" is any less repetitive or boring? It is if you're not a sports fan. You're not an RTS fan; so be it. But don't claim there's no innovation in the genre just because you don't like it. I'm not wasting any more time on you.

Most evenings you can still find Snipe playing TA on TEN. Gomab is still selling boxed copies of RTS games out of the back of his sport utility vehicle at swap meets. He's hoping to fund replacement players for the US soccer team in time for the next World Cup.

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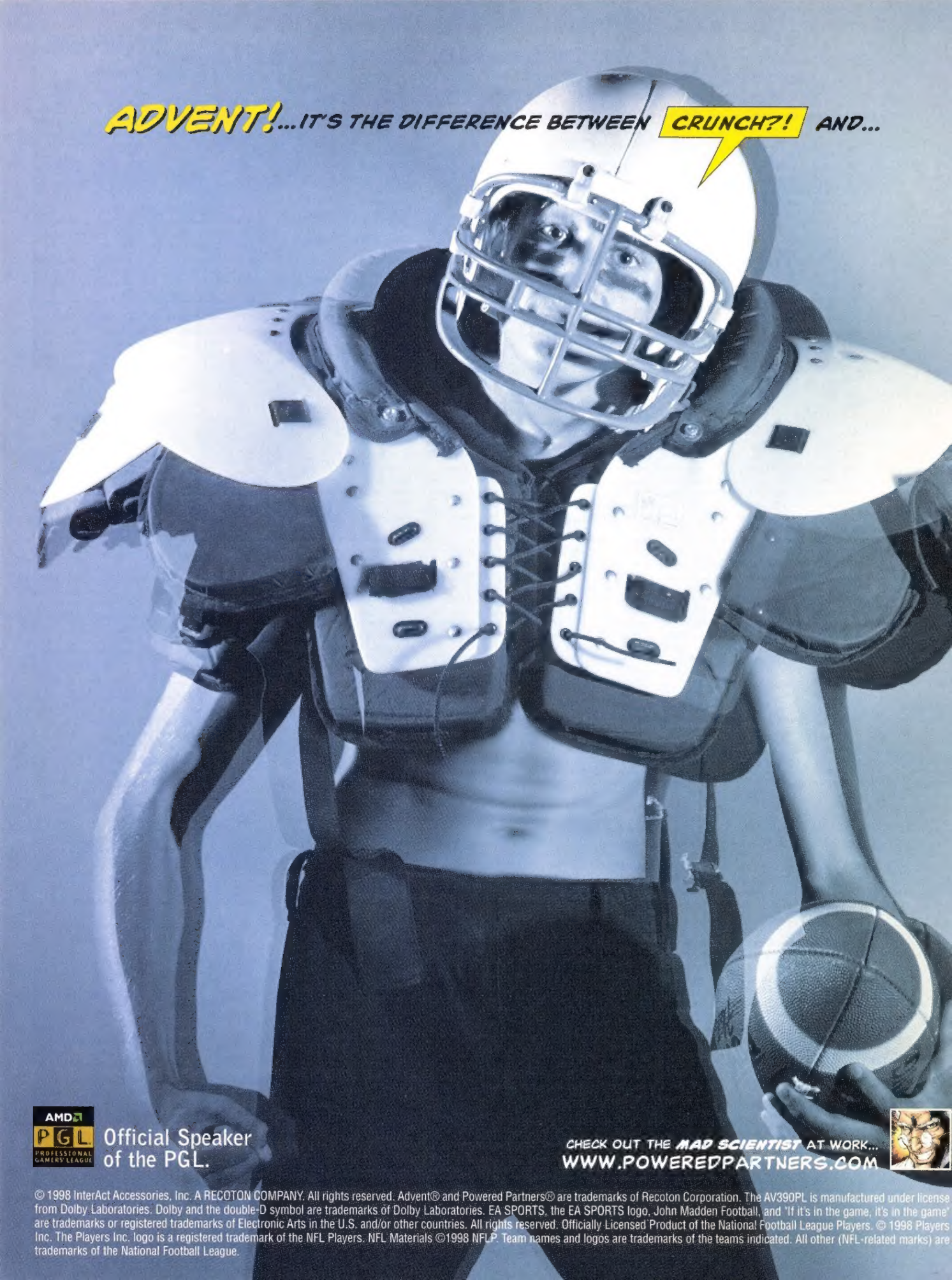

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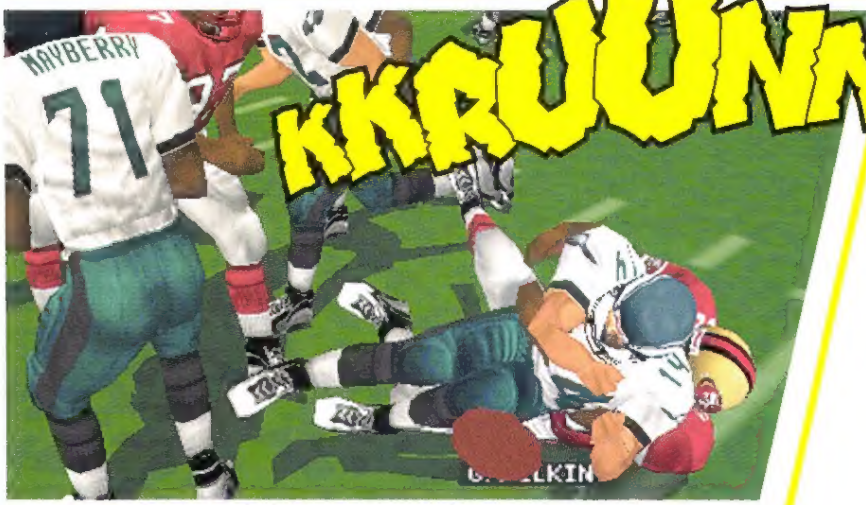

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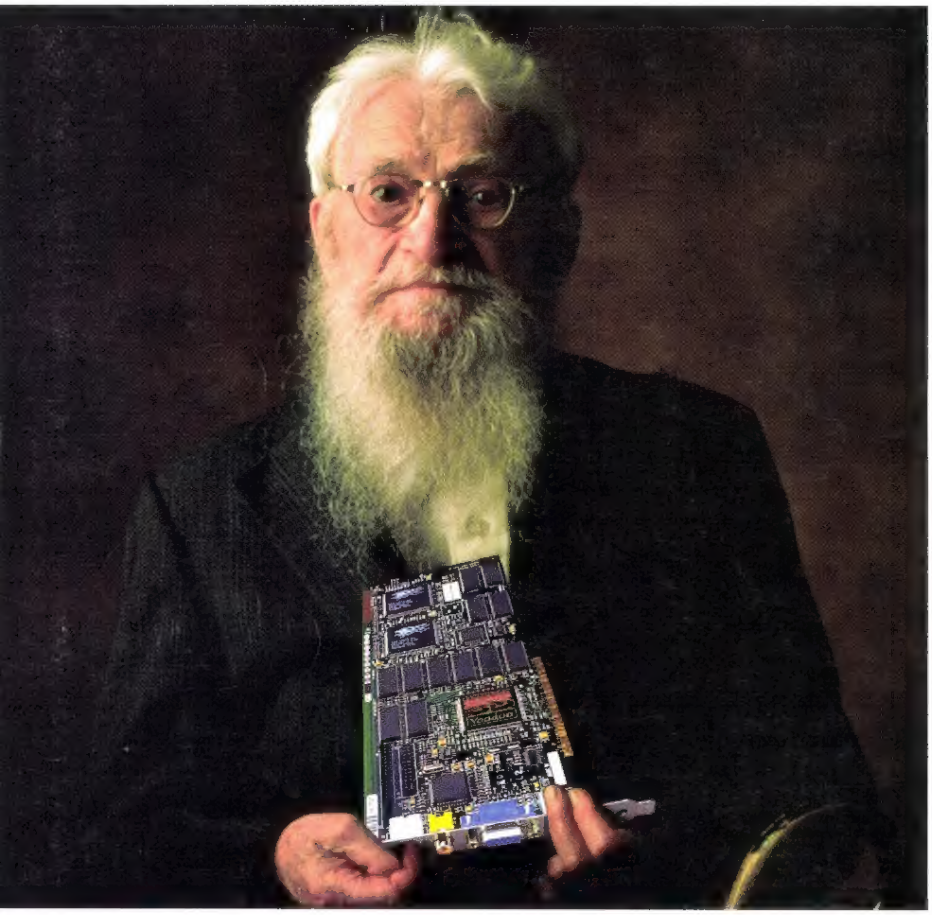

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